

FC CINCINNATI

Why FC Cincinnati fans booed Messi

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Kyle Phillips waited anxiously as FC Cincinnati neared their match against Inter Miami CF.

The vice president of the [Norden](#) supporters group had just watched his favorite team blow a two-goal lead to their rivals, the Columbus Crew, losing 4-2. Now, Lionel Messi was coming to town.

So, once the match kicked off, Phillips booed.

“There was a lot of anxiousness (after) that collapse, being fresh in our minds and going into a match where the best player in the world can just open up a game all by himself,” he said. “It was one of those, ‘Oh no, here we go again (moments).’”

Phillips was one of many fans at [TQL Stadium](#) who booed Messi nearly every time the Argentine star touched the ball on June 16. Fans and experts largely agreed that incessant booing generally stemmed from Inter Miami’s roster construction, Cincinnati’s culture and TQL Stadium’s intimacy, despite a consensus that Messi’s MLS inclusion should benefit the league.

Montclair State University Associate Professor, Stephen Andon, who has researched fan culture, went even further, suggesting the heckling was a sign of maturation for soccer in the United States.



Inter Miami forward Lionel Messi (10) passes the ball in the second half of the match between FC Cincinnati and Inter Miami in Cincinnati on Wednesday, July 16, 2025. Albert Cesare/The Enquirer

“It’s a tip of the cap, honestly, (to) Cincinnati fans for not just being like, ‘Oh, we are just gonna bask in the greatness of this guy,’” Andon said. “It’s like, ‘No, this he’s coming to beat us – we are gonna boo this guy.’”

Inter Miami builds roster in a curious way

Inter Miami has been the center of fan criticism since Messi’s arrival in MLS, with some supporters accusing the league of providing the star’s team special treatment.

The team was [sanctioned in 2020](#) for violating roster guidelines

and salary budget rules, specifically related to the signing of French midfielder Blaise Matuidi. MLS’s investigation found that the team incorrectly categorized Matuidi and defender Andrés Reyes, while underreporting the salary budgets of three players,

resulting in a \$2 million fine for the club and a \$250,000 fee for the managing owner, Jorge Mas. The league also reduced Inter Miami's allocation dollars by over \$2 million for the 2022 and 2023 seasons.

Still, in 2023, Inter Miami managed to bring in renowned talents, Sergio Busquets, Jordi Alba and Messi. And in that offseason, they added Uruguayan striker Luis Suárez.

Messi, Alba and Busquets now occupy Inter Miami's three designated player (DP) spots, which allows clubs to exceed salary cap restrictions on certain players' wages. Meanwhile, the team is paying Suárez by using targeted allocation money (TAM), which is commonly used by teams to "buy down" a player's salary to free a DP spot.

On July 16, [ESPN reported](#) that Inter Miami would be adding another high-level talent in Argentine midfielder Rodrigo De Paul from Atlético Madrid. While the move is not official, many fans were quick to wonder how the club could secure such a high talent with no DP openings. But ESPN noted that De Paul would not require such a slot "initially" as he will be on loan to begin with Inter Miami.

Some fans and analysts lauded Inter Miami's roster creativity, while others rebuked their moves, suggesting they wouldn't have been possible outside of South Florida. Many critics have [pointed out](#) that the Crew were unable to buy down midfielder Darlington Nagbe's contract in 2023, which led to the team selling All-Star midfielder Lucas Zelarayan.

So, while Inter Miami's roster building appears to be within the league's regulations, some fans speculated that the club was receiving special treatment from the league.

"We just fundamentally boo Messi every single time because of what he represents, and some of the frustrations," said Zach Blandford, president of FC Cincinnati supporter group, The Pride. "It feels like there's a different set of rules for (Inter Miami), and he has a personal human representation of that, and so in that way, we don't like him."

Similarly, Phillips said the way Inter Miami constructed their roster might have rubbed some people the wrong way.

Meanwhile, Andon noted that Messi represents more than his "lieutenants," Suárez and Busquets. He said that some fans might perceive that Messi is pulling financial strings and receiving different treatment from MLS.

"Anytime we see or think of somebody as a cheater in the world of sports – and not that Messi, has out and out cheated – but usually that becomes, you know, a great target for scorn," Andon said.

FC Cincinnati fan culture

Blandford said that booing Messi also represents Cincinnati's sports culture and that the act is not exclusive to the Argentine. He mentioned that FC Cincinnati fans have been willing to heckle other teams' players, like [Luciano "Lucho" Acosta](#), who [departed FC Cincinnati before this season](#) after requesting a move.

Still, Blandford said the energy against Inter Miami was more intense than most other matches, minus the likes of Hell Is Real games.

"If you are not from Cincinnati, we don't like or care about you," Blandford said. "It doesn't matter who you are (and it) doesn't matter your profile, if you are not playing for our team or (are) from our city, we don't want you to have a good time when you come here."

Phillips echoed that sentiment, saying he booed Messi because his season ticket seats are just a couple of rows from the field in the [First Financial Club](#). He said he remembers lightheartedly heckling former New York Red Bulls defender, John Tolkin, when FC Cincinnati were Wooden Spoon contenders, prompting a chuckle from the American.

Similarly, Phillips said he wanted to treat Messi the same way he would any other player, despite the Argentine's greatness. He added that his booing only spanned the duration of the match and that he wanted to drown out the applauses of any Messi supporters in attendance.

"It's kind of the blue collar Cincinnati mentality," Phillips said. "We love our own, and when you're trying to defeat our team, we're going to be hostile."

FC Cincinnati vs. Inter Miami stayed at TQL Stadium

Several clubs moved their matches against Inter Miami to larger stadiums to accommodate the large interest surrounding Messi, but FC Cincinnati did not.

This season, Sporting Kansas City faced the Herons at Arrowhead Stadium, the home of the Kansas City Chiefs. Similarly, the Crew moved their match about two hours away to Cleveland, Ohio, to square off at Huntington Bank Field, where the Cleveland Browns play.

Andon said that relocating a match dissipates the hardcore fans and lures more pro-Messi fans to the stadium, even if the game is played in the same city. By keeping the Inter Miami game at TQL Stadium, FC Cincinnati could maintain more supporters.

Andon added that sports are about rituals, especially in soccer, where supporters sections promote passionate environments. Fans in The Bailey want to be intimidating, he said, and TQL Stadium is designed to reinforce that – other stadiums do not.

"If FC Cincinnati had played this game at (Paycor Stadium), that would be like wearing somebody else's clothes, or stepping into somebody else's house," Andon said. "Those things matter to people over the course of time."

Phillips said long-time supporters feel abandoned by their clubs when games are moved. He added he appreciated that FC Cincinnati didn't change their match location.

"It's a little disheartening to see clubs abandon their fans, especially the way that – I don't really want to speak nice of the Crew or their fans – but I definitely understand the frustration, I get it," Phillips said. "Maybe moving it to Ohio Stadium, something like in the city, but moving it all the way to Cleveland, that's a disservice. At that point, you're catering to Messi fans."

Larry Henry Jr., a managing editor for [SBI Soccer](#) and freelance Live Team reporter for [The Athletic](#), said Messi's arrival in MLS has been a "whirlwind." He noted how some clubs offered complimentary tickets when the Argentine didn't travel to their stadiums.

Still, Henry, based in Pennsylvania, said Messi's stint in the league has been beneficial despite the challenges that surround the superstar.

"(Philadelphia Union fans) definitely like having Messi in the league, but they've also in the same time are like, 'okay, we're not going to let this one kind of player, an amazing international player, kind of define who Miami is,'" Henry said. "it's definitely gotten mixed receptions."

The future of soccer in America

Ultimately, Blandford said Messi's arrival in MLS is valuable for the league because it raises revenue, boosts social media engagement and draws people to Apple TV, which houses MLS Season Pass. However, he added the league can better capitalize on the moment by leveraging league-wide growth, rather than just in South Florida.

For example, Blandford wants to see MLS loosen its roster rules to allow for greater depth in rosters. He likes how limited DP spots promote parity, but wants more ways for teams to enhance squad quality within that framework.

Blandford also said he hopes other top players might view MLS more favorably because Messi has competed in the league.

"I think the system as it's built does create interesting parity, but at the same time, like loosening it up a little bit, allowing teams to get a little bit better depth, making the rules a little bit clearer so people can actually understand them, I think that would be a good thing," Blandford said.

Henry said that many fans understand that watching Messi play is a "once in a lifetime experience." But he added that the booing shows growth.

"It shows that fans are watching the league," Henry said. "They know who the talent is ... Leo Messi, you're here in our stadium and everything, but we're still going to boo you for 90 minutes if you're on the other side of the field ... (That's) probably a sign of respect between the fans and Messi because they know how talented he is. But that's not going to stand in the way of (their) local support for (their) local club."

Andon also said MLS is gaining momentum. And FC Cincinnati fans heckling Messi is a sign that the U.S. is becoming a "proper" soccer country.

"I don't know if it's a turning of the tide in the U.S., Messi soccer scene, but it is a good indicator of the elevated fan consumption [towards] Messi's presence," Andon said.