

In Sports, a Must-Win Situation Usually Leads to a Loss

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On May 31st, Mauricio Macri, the President of Argentina, met with the members of the nation's soccer team as they departed for training before the [World Cup](#), which opens, in Russia, on Thursday.

"Whatever we Argentinians achieve, we will be happy," Macri told the squad, [in televised remarks](#).

"And it is not true that if one does not become a champion, one is a failure; that is a madness that does not exist anywhere in the world." This, coming from the leader of a soccer-mad nation—the home of Lionel Messi, no less—was a shocking concession: *Our team might not win the World Cup. And if they don't, we'll love them anyway.*

Macri's statement was calibrated to lower the pressure of expectation on the squad, particularly on Messi, who is widely regarded as the best soccer player in Argentine history (Diego Maradona [might disagree](#)) and maybe the best anywhere, ever. Argentina has won the World Cup twice—the last time in 1986, with Maradona—but not in its last three appearances, with Messi. After the 2014 tournament, which saw Argentina lose the final to Germany in overtime, the bitterness was audible, and, in 2016, after losing the Copa América Centenario (and missing a penalty kick), Messi quit the national team. He was coaxed back, but the squad struggled to qualify for the 2018 tournament and is defensively weak; Messi, who turns thirty-one soon, could be playing his last World Cup. Macri, in his remarks, seemed to be looking to balance hope against reality—and perhaps, by lowering the psychological burden, to increase the odds of success

In economics and psychology, "expected utility theory" predicts that people work hardest, and perform their best, when the net returns to effort are highest. Pain equals gain. It's a common theme in military narratives: the behavioral psychologist Daniel Ariely, in his book "[Predictably Irrational](#)," offers the example of the Chinese warlord Xiang Yu, who, crossing the Yellow River in 208 B.C., spurred his rebel forces onward by burning their ships behind them. And plenty of research shows that avoiding loss can be an incentive. A 2011 study, in which the researchers analyzed the results of two and a half million golf putts, found that golfers tried harder when putting for par—that is, to avoid a bogey, one shot over par—than when putting for a birdie, par-minus-one.