

Berbatov sinks Boro

AFP, Manchester

Dimitar Berbatov still to hit it off at Manchester United since arriving from Spurs in September, settled this tense clash with a 69th minute volley to give the Champions League holders a 1-0 victory here on Monday.

And it ensured that Premier League champions United, who extended their run without conceding a league goal to ten hours and two minutes, remained well in contention for the title going into the New Year.

United's 1-0 victory at Stoke on Friday, courtesy of a late goal from Carlos Tevez, kept the champions within touching distance of leaders Liverpool at the top of the Premier League.

But United manager Sir Alex Ferguson was without the Argentinian forward for this game after allowing him to return to South America to deal with a 'family issue' in Buenos Aires.

Still, with Wayne Rooney, Dimitar Berbatov and Cristiano Ronaldo available up-front, United certainly possessed ample firepower with which to overcome Middlesbrough. But in a wasteful first-half, chances went astray and Ronaldo was

the main culprit.

The Portuguese forward, wearing a pair of luminous lime green boots, hardly justified his bold choice of footwear as he fluffed a series of clear-cut chances to score his first league goals for six weeks.

As early as the seventh minute, Ronaldo was found unmarked on the penalty spot by South Korean midfielder Park Ji-Sung, but instead of slotting past goalkeeper Ross Turnbull, the United star aimed a limp left-foot effort wide of the post.

He then went close with two freekicks in quick succession before shooting wide at the far post once more on twenty-two minutes after Darren Fletcher had dumfied Rooney's cross for Ronaldo.

United could at least console themselves by their heavy dominance of possession, but Middlesbrough had the ability to hurt them on the break and Brazilian striker Afonso Alves almost embarrassed them when he shot narrowly over the crossbar after skilfully escaping the attentions of defender Nemanja Vidic.

The game exploded in first-half stoppage time, however, when referee Martin Atkinson enraged Ronaldo by failing to award a penalty after the United man had been dragged to the ground by

Emmanuel Pogatzetz.

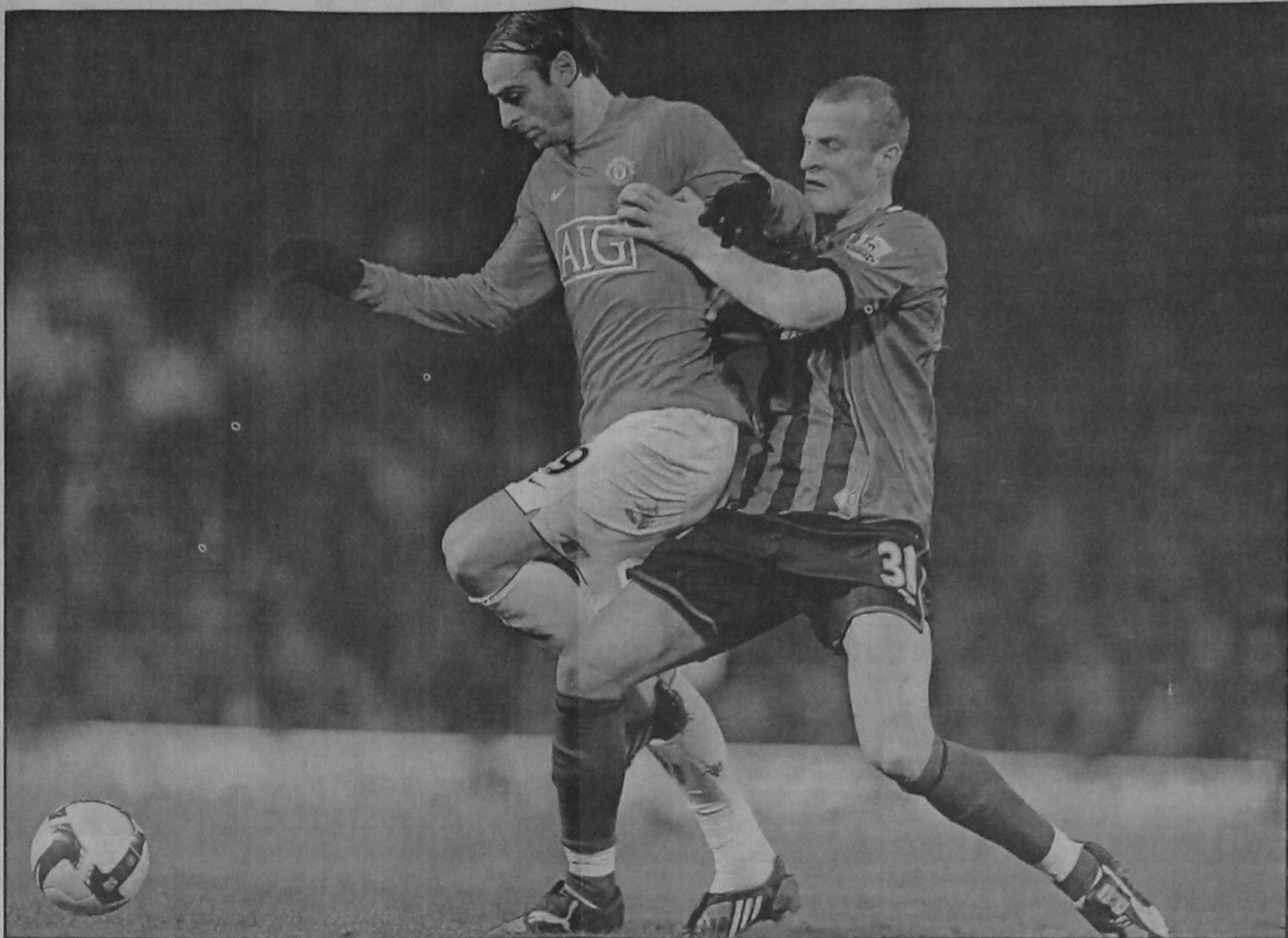
Ronaldo continued to complain to Atkinson after the half-time whistle, before racing half the length of the pitch to confront Pogatzetz near the players' tunnel. The pair clashed heads and continued their row outside the dressing-rooms.

The simmering tensions subsided in the second-half, but United's performance did not improve and Middlesbrough were hugely unlucky not to take the lead through Tuncay Sanli on 62 minutes.

Matthew Bates's cross from the right-flank was met by the Turkey international with a diving header, but Tuncay could only watch as the ball flashed inches wide of Edwin van der Sar's left-hand post.

It was a real let-off for United and they made it count seven minutes later when Berbatov broke the deadlock with only his third goal for the club since his £30.75m September arrival from Spurs.

Park's tenacity led to Michael Carrick crossing into the penalty area and, when David Wheeler failed to clear, Berbatov volleyed past Turnbull from close range to open the scoring and take United three points closer to Liverpool at the top of table.



Manchester United striker Dimitar Berbatov (L) is challenged by Middlesbrough midfielder David Wheeler during their Premiership encounter at Old Trafford on Monday. Berbatov scored the all-important goal in the match.

Arshavin in demand

INTERNET, undated

Andrei Arshavin's agent has said his client remains a New Year transfer target for Arsenal but claims that -- like actress Angelina Jolie -- the Russia playmaker could be unattainable.

His availability has alerted a number of Europe's top clubs, with the 27-year-old widely regarded as one of the continent's top talents.

Tottenham, Arsenal, Real Madrid and Barcelona have all been linked with the midfielder, and are unlikely to be put off by a reported £12million price tag.

And agent Dennis Lachter told the Daily Mirror: "We know that Arsene Wenger likes the look of Arshavin."

"But I like the look of Angelina Jolie and it doesn't always mean you get what you want."

"Arsenal were interested in signing him last summer and they still are, so we will wait and see what happens."

"There has been a lot of interest in him this time as well from England, Spain and Italy."

Gerrard faces jail term

Football

AFP, London

England football star Steven Gerrard was charged Tuesday with assault on an alleged bar brawl while celebrating a win for Premiership leaders Liverpool, police said.

Liverpool football club voiced its full support for the 28-year-old, who was released on police bail but could in theory face up to five years in jail if convicted.

"Steven has been an outstanding servant to Liverpool for the last ten years and the club will give him all the support he needs at this time," a spokesman said, in the club's first comment since the incident early Monday.

The Liverpool captain, 28, was charged along with two other men who were also arrested at around 2:30 am Monday after the incident at the Lounge Inn restaurant and bar in Southport, near Liverpool in northwest England.

The venue's disc jockey, a 34-year-old man, required hospital treatment after suf-

fering facial injuries.

"He was charged in the early hours of this morning with assault and affray," a spokesman for Merseyside Police told AFP.

"The three men will be appearing at North Sefton Magistrates' Court on January 23," said a police statement. Three other men arrested in connection with the incident were released on police bail.

The player could face up to five years in jail if convicted, according to a spokesman for the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), who said that was the maximum sentence for assault, while affray draws a maximum term of three years.

If he were sent to prison, Gerrard would follow in the boots of Manchester United legend George Best, jailed for 12 weeks for drink-driving and assaulting a policeman in 1984, and more recently Joey Barton, the Newcastle midfielder jailed for six months for attacking a man in Liverpool in December 2007.

Gerrard, not normally known for off-field indiscretions, featured heavily on the front pages rather than the

back sports pages in newspapers Tuesday.

According to The Sun daily, Gerrard has been assured that his England career under coach Fabio Capello is safe despite his arrest, while the Daily Telegraph said he is unlikely to face a Football Association or club charge.

Monday's incident occurred hours after Liverpool won 5-1 at Newcastle United on Sunday, with Gerrard scoring two goals. Also charged were John Doran, 29, and Ian Smith, 19, both from Liverpool.

The Reds head into the New Year with a three-point lead over Chelsea at the top of the Premier League table.

Liverpool won the last of their record 18 English titles in 1990 and keeping star player Gerrard fit and available is widely considered essential if they are to win the Premier League this season.

The footballer is not known for controversy. However in 2001 he was spotted out drinking 11 hours before he was due to meet up with the rest of the England squad and had to apologise to then national manager Sven-Goran Eriksson.

No exceptions for Real

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid must choose between new signings Klaas-Jan Huntelaar and Lassana Diarra to play in the knock-out stages of the Champions League, UEFA spokesman William Gaillard said on Spanish radio.

"I am very sorry, but the rules are what they are and they cannot be changed in the middle of a season," he said on Onda Cero radio. "That means that only one of the two players can play in the Champions League..."

"They can include either Huntelaar or Diarra."

The Spanish champions, plagued by injuries and poor form this season, signed Dutch striker Huntelaar and French midfielder Diarra this month from Ajax and English side Portsmouth respectively.

But under UEFA rules only one of them can play in the Champions League as both have already represented their former clubs in Europe this season.

Real had hoped to convince European football's governing body to agree to a different interpretation of the rule so that both players could take part.

The club has been drawn against Liverpool in the Champions League first knockout round on February 25 and March 10.

The club -- who are fifth in the Spanish title race some 12 points adrift of Barcelona -- have suffered season-ending injuries to key players Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy and Malian midfielder Mahamadou Diarra.

UEFA rules for the 2008-09 season state that a club may register up to three new players for the knockout stage of the Champions League.

But only one of these can be a player who has represented his former club in Europe, and provided it was in another European competition. Both Ajax and Portsmouth were competing in the UEFA Cup this season.

3-way fight for title

AFP, Manchester



Sir Alex Ferguson insisted that the Premier League title race will be a three-way fight between Manchester United, Liverpool and Chelsea after Dimitar Berbatov's second-half strike sealed a narrow 1-0 win against Middlesbrough at Old Trafford on Monday.

Berbatov's third league goal in a United shirt -- allied to the club's seventh successive Premier League clean-sheet -- secured the victory that takes the reigning champions to within seven points of leaders Liverpool with two games in hand.

United struggled to overcome Gareth Southgate's team for lengthy periods, but with the points in the bag, Ferguson predicted a tense run-in to the title in 2009.

"It's going to be a great run-in, really exciting, but I wouldn't say that Liverpool are a greater threat than Chelsea now," said Ferguson.

"Chelsea are a great side too, but the important thing is to do our own job and we have always done that."

"Important results will come in April and May, but because teams like Chelsea

and Liverpool are points and games ahead of us, we need some leeway to get back in the picture."

"We are now in a good position at the turn of the year, though, and we have the two games in hand -- against Wigan and Fulham -- which are both at home."

"We have played more fixtures away from home, so once we have played those fixtures at home, it brings us level with those we have played away."

Ferguson admitted that United's Achilles heel in the second-half of the season could be their inability to convert the series of chances that they are carving out in games.

Berbatov's goal settled this clash, but the United manager fears that further wastefulness could prove costly.

"Three points was the name of the game, but you have to say how well Middlesbrough played tonight. They played very well," said Ferguson.

"We have had to work hard for it, though, and we have missed a lot of chances again. Unless we start taking these chances, we'll be made to suffer for it."

The game boiled over on the brink of half-time when Cristiano Ronaldo reacted

angrily to referee Martin Atkinson's failure to award a penalty after he had been wrestled to the ground by Emmanuel Pogatzetz.

Ronaldo and Pogatzetz then clashed as they walked off the pitch at the interval and continued their row in the tunnel, but Ferguson admitted that he was not surprised to see the penalty turned down by Atkinson.

"It seemed as though Pogatzetz grabbed him around the neck, but that happens in penalty boxes all the time," said Ferguson.

"We've had referees coming to meet the players a couple of years ago and they said it would be stamped with one warning and then a red card."

Boro manager Gareth Southgate admitted that the referee's decision sparked an angry response from United, but he insisted that the incident was nothing serious.

"When teams are defending from corners, there will obviously be contact. People might try to make something of it, but there wasn't much to it really," said Southgate.

"I heard a lot of noise and finger-pointing, but I don't think anything went on."

"The referee and his assistants seemed pretty comfortable with it and they were in the tunnel."

Iniesta set to return

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona midfielder Andres Iniesta, sidelined since the beginning of November with a muscle injury, has received the green light from doctors to return to action, the club said on Monday.

The 24-year-old Spanish international will join the squad to face Real Mallorca on Saturday.

Iniesta strained his right thigh muscle during the second half of Barcelona's 1-1 Champions League draw against Swiss side Basel at the Nou Camp on November 4.

'Axe factor to blame'

AFP, London



Manchester City's Brazilian star Robinho says the threat of being dropped is a factor behind the club's patchy English Premiership form.

With the Dubai-based consortium behind the blue half of Manchester set to give coach Mark Hughes big money to spend when the transfer window opens on Thursday, Robinho says several players are beginning to wonder if their days are numbered.

Robinho, signed from Real Madrid under the noses of Chelsea last summer, for 32.5 million pounds (35 million euros), says those concerns have dragged down the performance of the team.

"It is incredible that with this squad we have appeared to be fighting relegation," Robinho said in Tuesday's Daily Mail.

"I must admit I don't really understand it

and it has been the one question talked about more than any other in our dressing room."

"One theory I have is that the constant rumours about possible reinforcements in January have damaged us in some way."

"Some of my teammates do perhaps fear for their future and that is not positive, I guess. But there is nothing we can do about that apart from try not to let it affect us."

Robinho's last-gasp goal secured a draw with Blackburn on Sunday to keep City just out of the relegation zone.

But he insisted that "if we show the pride that we did in the last game then we will be okay."

His 12 goals this season have at least ensured he personally has no reason to fear the chop -- though he says he also must improve.

"I have to say that still I am not really happy with my performances. People have not seen the big Robinho yet. They have not seen the real Robinho."

Ribery thinking ahead

Football

SOCCERNET

Franck Ribery has set his sights on playing for a top club in England or Spain, but insists he has no plans to leave Bayern Munich before his contract expires in 2011.

Speaking to Germany's Kicker magazine, the France international revealed it would be a "dream" to represent another one of Europe's top clubs.

"Bayern is obviously one of the biggest and best clubs in the world," he said. "Obviously there are other clubs who would be a dream: Real Madrid and Barcelona, Chelsea and

Manchester United.

"I certainly love Real Madrid because of their great tradition. But I feel happy here at Bayern. We will have to wait and see what the future holds."

The winger, who was voted the Bundesliga's best player of 2008 by Kicker, added that he still has ambitions of winning the Champions League with Bayern and insists they can fulfil that dream this year.

Bayern face Sporting Lisbon in the last 16 of the competition and will be favourites to make the quarterfinals at least.

And at the midway stage of the Bundesliga, they lie joint top of the table with Hoffenheim while they face Stuttgart in the last 16 of the DFB-Pokal.



Milan captain Paolo Maldini (R) and coach Carlo Ancelotti (C) receive replica planes of Emirates Airlines from the carrier's vice executive chairman Maurice Flanagan during a press conference in Dubai on Tuesday.

Adebayor best in Togo again

AFP, Lome

Emmanuel Adebayor has been voted Togo Footballer of the Year for the fourth consecutive year by local sports journalists it was announced on Monday.

The Arsenal striker returned to the national team during October after a row with officials over travelling conditions and scored four goals against Swaziland to keep Togo in contention for a place at the 2010 World Cup.

Adebayor is a finalist for the 2008 African Footballer of the Year award with Chelsea's Didier Drogba of Ivory Coast and the latter's club mate Michael Essien of Ghana and Egyptians Mohamed Aboutraika and Amr Zaki, who has scored 10 goals for his on loan Premier League club Wigan this season.

Messi wants to play against France

Football

SOCCERNET

Lionel Messi has approached Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola with a request to allow him to play in Argentina's friendly against France in February.

The winger's inquiry comes despite and agreement between Barcelona and the Argentinian Football Association (AFA) that he would not play in friendly matches unless special circumstances arise.

That deal was struck following the Olympics earlier this year as an act of goodwill from the AFA after Barcelona allowed the 21-year-old to appear for his country despite a ruling of Arbitration of Sport ruling that they could justifiably deny him

from doing so.

Messi told TyC Sports cable today that Guardiola had agreed to his request, although the Barca board are yet to rubber stamp the coach's approval.

And while Messi admitted that may prove problematic, he said he had asked to be released to play in the February 11 match because it would be his final opportunity to meet up with new Argentina coach Diego Maradona before the World Cup qualifiers resume in March.

Messi said: "If Diego names me for February, I will be there. I already talked to Guardiola about this and he understood."

"Talking to the directors is much more difficult, but Pep understood because he was a player."

"I will never say 'no' to Argentina, but I also respect my club a lot. That's why I want to

make things clear.

"If I am only able to play in the (World Cup) qualifiers then it will be difficult for me to have a contact with Maradona and my teammates before then."

"That's why I decided to talk to Guardiola, because if I have to wait for something from the AFA and then from Barcelona board, then it becomes more difficult. They have their reasons and I understand them."

"I knew Guardiola would understand me."

Messi added that his form with his country was being hampered by his lack of preparation with the national team.

"I know I am not the same with Barcelona as I am with the national team," he added. "In the World Cup qualifiers, people and the media criticised us and it makes you play under more pressure."