

Bumper deal for Messi

SOCCERNET

Lionel Messi will become Barcelona's highest-paid player when he signs a new contract this week, according to club president Joan Laporta.

The Argentina star, 22, is one of world football's leading lights and last season helped inspire Barcelona to an unprecedented treble as they collected the Primera Liga, Copa del Rey and Champions League titles.

Messi scored 38 goals in all competitions, as well as claiming 16 assists, and is rated as one of the favourites to succeed Cristiano Ronaldo as FIFA World Player of the Year in December.

The forward's current contract expires in 2014 but Barca are determined to keep hold of the Nou Camp hero and, despite the high-profile signing of Zlatan Ibrahimovic in the summer, have agreed a deal that will see Messi rise to the top of the club's top earners list.

"Leo should be the highest-paid player in the squad," Laporta told Catalan radio. "He deserves it. He's the best player in the world and one of the best in football history."

"Messi has already agreed to a new contract. He's content and that's why he's playing the way he is."

Laporta is also hopeful of retaining the services of captain Carles Puyol despite recent suggestions that the player may not be entirely happy at Camp Nou following the acquisition of Ukrainian defender Dmytro Chyhyrnskiy.

"I am convinced that Puyol is keen to end his career at Barca," Laporta said. "But I also understand that a player of his age examines the possibility of having an experience outside of Spain."

Wrong studs was Forlan's downfall

SOCCERNET

Diego Forlan says his Manchester United career ended when he failed to wear the right boots for a vital game against Chelsea, thus risking - and engaging - the wrath of Sir Alex Ferguson.

Forlan took 27 games to score his first goal for United and failed to find the form during his Old Trafford spell between 2002 and 2004 that subsequently marked him out as one of the best strikers in Europe with both Villarreal and Atletico Madrid.

His time at United came to an abrupt end when Forlan opted not to follow advice to wear boots with larger studs, and getting caught in the act.

(Manager Sir Alex) Ferguson wanted me to play with high studs, the interchangeable ones that suit wet pitches," Forlan told the official Champions League magazine. "But I feel more comfortable in low ones. I agreed to change boots, but I didn't. Against Chelsea, I slipped in front of goal and wasted a chance. Afterwards, I rushed to the dressing room to change boots. Ferguson caught me. He grabbed the boots and threw them. That was my last game for United."

Despite his goal drought, United fans remember Forlan fondly, most specifically for a double at Liverpool during their 2002-3 title-winning campaign as well as vital goals against Chelsea and Southampton in the same season.



PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool midfielder Steven Gerrard (L) and forward Dirk Kuyt attend a training session at their Melwood training ground on Tuesday ahead of their Champions League encounter against Debrecen.

FA charges Adebayor

AFP, London



Manchester City's Emmanuel Adebayor was on Tuesday charged by the Football Association with violent and improper conduct over a challenge on former Arsenal team-mate Robin van Persie and his provocative goal celebration.

Adebayor, signed by City from Arsenal for 25 million pounds last month, has been accused of deliberately stamping on van Persie during Saturday's match in what the Dutch striker has condemned as a "mindless and malicious" assault.

The Togo international also sprinted the length of the pitch to celebrate his goal in

City's 4-2 win in front of the Arsenal supporters.

A steward was knocked unconscious by a missile thrown from the Arsenal section of the ground and Adebayor's conduct has been severely criticised by Manchester police.

The FA announced that "under the fast-track disciplinary process, Adebayor has been charged with violent conduct following an incident with Robin van Persie, which resulted in the Arsenal player receiving facial injuries."

"Referee Mark Clattenburg has advised the FA that he did not see this incident, but has confirmed that had he done so, he would have sent Adebayor off for violent conduct. The player has until 6pm on Wednesday evening to respond to the charge," the FA

said.

"Adebayor has also been charged with improper conduct following his actions when turning and running the full length of the pitch to celebrate in front of the Arsenal supporters after scoring."

"The Greater Manchester Police have written to The FA with their views on this incident. A separate date will now be arranged for a commission to consider Adebayor's goal celebration."

The FA added that the police and clubs had been asked to identify those supporters involved in any "violent and aggravating behaviour".

"The FA would like to see anyone found guilty of such behaviour face action through the legal system and banning orders from football."

Diego heads to Europe

Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

Under-fire Argentina coach Diego Maradona has travelled to Europe, thereby avoiding a crucial meeting on the poor performances of the national side, his personal doctor said on Monday.

"He left yesterday (Sunday) for a spa in Italy," Alfredo Cahen told AFP.

"In order to respect his privacy, I cannot reveal the name of the town."

Reports from other media sources claimed that Maradona was actually in Spain.

Maradona, 48, has seen two-time world champions Argentina slip to fifth in the South American qualifying standings for the 2010 World Cup, a place below the auto-

matic qualification slots, after four defeats in their last five games.

His flight to Europe means the former hero of the national side will avoid a meeting scheduled to take place here on Monday involving Argentina general manager Carlos Bilardo and Julio Grondona, president of the Argentine Football Association (AFA) and vice-president of world governing body FIFA.

According to Argentine press reports, Grondona intended to ask Maradona to delegate more responsibility to Bilardo, who was the coach of Argentina in 1986 when Maradona captained the side to World Cup glory in Mexico.

Cahen underlined that Maradona's trip to Europe "was planned a month ago to give him some exercise and a

bit of rest for a week."

"He's not being hospitalised," Cahen added. "He did some tests 10 or 12 days ago and the results were fine."

Argentine daily La Nacion reported that Maradona had checked into a spa that he knows well in Merano, north-eastern Italy.

The sojourn had reportedly been booked in advance in expectation of positive results in Argentina's last few matches.

Bilardo rallied to Maradona's defence on Friday, declaring that only the arrival of "Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary" could justify his sacking.

Argentina host already eliminated Peru on October 10 before travelling to neighbours Uruguay, who trail the 'Albiceleste' by a single point, four days later.

Barca travel to Inter

AFP, Paris



Defending champions Barcelona travel to Inter Milan on Wednesday's stand-out Champions League fixture, with Barca's Zlatan Ibrahimovic set for a swift reunion with the club he left in the summer.

The Swedish striker's switch to the Nou Camp was one of the sensations of the close-season transfer window, after Barca paid an eye-watering 46 million euros to secure his signature and threw Cameroonian forward Samuel Eto'o into the bargain as well.

Both men have made goalscoring starts to life at their new clubs but Ibrahimovic provoked the ire of his former employers by suggesting that he was the main reason for the three Serie A crowns they won during his time at the San Siro.

Inter's Ghanaian midfielder Sulley Muntari was quick to remind his former team-mate that there was more to Inter's title successes than Ibrahimovic's goals.

"Ibra says Barcelona are stronger than Inter, but I think we are stronger than they are," said Muntari.

"Why? Because I play for Inter. One of those players who ran for Ibrahimovic, the

man who thinks he won it all by himself."

Ibrahimovic, though, says he will not be perturbed by the reaction of the crowd - or his ex-colleagues - when he returns to his old stomping ground.

"I'm not interested in how the crowd reacts, it is not important," said the former Juventus and Ajax man.

"It will be an enjoyable game, also because of the atmosphere that will be created. I had a good relationship with my teammates and I'll greet them with pleasure. I have nothing against them. After all, you don't easily forget three Scudetti in three years."

With Barca and Inter set to fight it out for superiority in Group F, the pressure will be on Dynamo Kiev and Russian Champions League debutants Rubin Kazan to get off to a good start when they meet in the Ukrainian capital.

Another club making their Champions League group-stage bow on Wednesday will be Hungarian champions Debrecen, who face a baptism of fire at five-time winners Liverpool.

The Merseysiders have endured a stuttering start to their Premier League campaign, losing two of their opening five matches, and manager Rafael Benitez says they must hit the ground running in Europe.

"We lost our first game a couple of seasons ago - that caused us a lot of problems," said the Spaniard. "We must be in control of the group straightaway."

Lyon and Fiorentina will provide a strong challenge to Benitez's side in Group E.

The Tuscan outfit travel to France on Wednesday and will be looking to avenge a 2-1 home defeat to Lyon in November 2008 that knocked them out of last season's competition.

Lyon themselves were eliminated at the quarter-finals by eventual champions Barcelona but coach Claude Puel feels they're well-placed to improve on that showing

after an expensive pre-season recruitment drive.

"The goal is to qualify for the knockout stages. No team starts this competition by claiming it will win," said Puel, who brought Brazilian winger Michel Bastos, Argentina striker Lisandro Lopez and France international forward Bafetimbi Gomis to Stade Gerland over the summer.

"For some players, last season was about learning. Today, we have become more natural and our offensive potential is higher."

Group H favourites Arsenal, semifinalists last year, begin their campaign at Belgian champions Standard Liege.

In the group's other game Olympiakos host Dutch champions AZ Alkmaar, who will be making their debut at this level but whose coach Ronald Koeman becomes the first man to lead five different teams into a Champions League campaign after previous stints at Ajax, Benfica, PSV Eindhoven and Valencia.

Sevilla host Romanian outsiders Unirea Urziceni in Group G, while Scottish giants Rangers travel to Stuttgart for the third instalment of a Champions League rivalry that has already seen the sides face off in the group stages of the 2003 and 2007 editions.

FIXTURES

Wednesday

(kick-offs all at 1845GMT)

Group E

Liverpool (ENG) v Debrecen (HUN), Lyon (FRA) v Fiorentina (ITA)

Group F

Inter Milan (ITA) v Barcelona (ESP), Dynamo Kiev (UKR) v Rubin Kazan (RUS)

Group G

VfB Stuttgart (GER) v Rangers (SCO), Sevilla (ESP) v Unirea Urziceni (ROM)

Group H

Olympiakos (GRE) v AZ Alkmaar (NED), Standard Liege (BEL) v Arsenal (ENG)

IN BRIEF

Fergie praises Rooney

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson insists Wayne Rooney hasn't changed his attitude since the departure of Cristiano Ronaldo.

"There is no difference between this and last season, in terms of his desire or anything," Ferguson said. "He is always wanting to score goals."

"Wayne has started the campaign well. He has six goals and that's terrific."

Costa Rica sack coach

AFP, San Jose

Rodrigo Kenton was sacked on Monday as coach of Costa Rica after three successive 2010 World Cup qualifier defeats which have placed their hopes of making it to South Africa in jeopardy.

Kenton had been in charge of Costa Rica since June 2008 and enjoyed a successful initial qualifying campaign before it hit the rocks with defeats to Honduras (4-0), Mexico (3-0) and El Salvador (1-0).

It leaves Costa Rica fourth in the table, with two matches remaining, only good enough for a play-off with the fifth-placed side in the South American zone.

Costa Rica - who have appeared at the last two World Cup finals - are at home to Trinidad and Tobago and then away to the United States.

Good result will lift us: Inzaghi

INTERNET, undated

Pippo Inzaghi admits some frustration over the lack of action he's seen for AC Milan this season.

"I do not like being on the bench, of course. But Leonardo was clear and he explained his decisions," said Inzaghi. "I cannot rescue this team on my own."

"We're going through a dark moment. We lack a little confidence and only good results will lift us."

Meanwhile, on the eve of their Champions League clash with Marseille, Rossoneri vice-president Adriano Galliani insisted coach Leonardo's job was not at risk.

"Leo told me that Forbes has called the city of Rio the happiest in the world. He was born there, so despite everything, he's calm," said Galliani.

Eduardo in spotlight

AFP, Liege



Arsenal forward Eduardo will be under the microscope in his side's Champions League clash at Standard Liege on Wednesday as he returns to European action after being granted a surprise reprieve by UEFA.

Eduardo was due to miss Arsenal's opening two matches in Europe's elite club competition following his suspension for allegedly deceiving the referee to win a penalty in the Gunners' qualifying-round victory over Celtic last month.

But Arsenal appealed the decision and the Brazil-born Croatian discovered on Monday that UEFA had overturned the original verdict after reviewing video evidence, allowing Eduardo to join Arsene Wenger's squad in Belgium.

The 26-year-old admitted he was relieved to have cleared his name and immediately set his sights on making a positive impact on Wednesday.

"I'm very pleased that we have finally arrived at the truth. All we needed to do was to prove what happened and we have managed to do that. This decision makes me feel a lot better," Eduardo said.

"I just want to say that I'm a fair player. To score goals you must take your opportunities

and I'm not the type of player who needs to be dishonest to score goals."

"Now I just want to forget about this and think about our match against Standard Liege on Wednesday."

"I was always prepared for the match in Belgium because I had a good feeling and I always remained positive about the outcome. Now we have a final result, I can now look forward to helping the team on Wednesday."

After a chastening 4-2 defeat at Manchester City on Saturday, Wenger's side desperately needed some good news and Eduardo's return will prove a much-needed morale boost.

More importantly, Eduardo's presence will allow Wenger to tinker with a team that was blown away by City.

If Eduardo starts alongside Robin van Persie, it is safe to say that both forwards will be in the limelight.

Every challenge that sends Eduardo to the ground will be analysed for any signs that he has exaggerated his fall, while Wenger will hope van Persie has completely recovered from being kicked in the head by former team-mate Emmanuel Adebayor at the weekend.

Tomas Rosicky could also play a significant role in helping Arsenal bounce back from two successive defeats.

The Czech Republic midfielder, fit at last after a series of injury problems, scored and provided an assist against City on his first Gunners appearance since January 2008.



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla midfielder Didier Zokora (L) and striker Luis Fabiano take part in a training session at the Ciudad Deportiva del Sevilla on Tuesday ahead of their Champions League clash against Urine.

Ancelotti targets final

AFP, Cobham



Carlo Ancelotti has told his Chelsea stars that reaching the Champions League final is the least they should achieve in Europe's elite club competition this season.

Ancelotti was hired by Blues owner Roman Abramovich partly because of his Champions League pedigree and the Italian, who won the competition twice during his reign at AC Milan, has set his new team a lofty goal before a ball has even been kicked.

"The first objective is to reach the final," Ancelotti said on Monday. "We want to arrive at the final before we think about winning it."

"It is not easy to reach the final but I think we have the possibility to do this."

"We have to try to do our best. We have a very strong team with fantastic players and a fantastic mental attitude."

Chelsea have endured a rocky ride in the Champions League since Abramovich made the tournament his holy grail after

buying the club in 2003.

They have been defeated at the semi-final stage four times, including last season's agonising exit to Barcelona, and came within one kick of winning it for the first time in the 2008 final, only for John Terry's penalty miss in the shoot-out to gift the trophy to Manchester United.

Ancelotti can't pin-point a reason for Chelsea's misfortune, but insists he doesn't feel under any extra pressure to end the club's long wait to be crowned kings of Europe.

"It is not that the club asked me to win the Champions League, they asked me to win the Champions League, the Premier League, the FA Cup and the League Cup!" Ancelotti said.

"For Chelsea it is important to be in these competitions and to have the possibility to win. To win is not easy because the Champions League is a very special competition."

"I don't know why they haven't won it. I think they have done very well in the Champions League because they reached the semi-finals five times in six years. It is not easy to do that."

"To win the Champions League is very

important. You need to be a little bit lucky but it isn't just luck. You have to believe if you want to do the best in this competition."

Ancelotti must cope without Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba for three matches and Portugal right-back Jose Bosingwa for two games as the pair serve European suspensions dished out by UEFA for their conduct at the end of last season's Barca defeat.

Drogba and Bosingwa hounded referee Tom Henning Ovrebo after he failed to award Chelsea three penalties before a last minute goal from Andres Iniesta knocked them out.

Losing Drogba is an especially big blow but Ancelotti believes Chelsea will be able to survive without their talismanic forward.

"We don't have Didier or Jose, but also Joe Cole and Paulo Ferreira will not be able to play and Deco cannot play as well."

"Didier is going very well. He has scored and worked very hard for the team but now we don't think about Didier. We have to think about the players who will go on the pitch. I think we can play well without Didier."

Player quotas in EPL

AFP, London



Clubs playing in the English Premier League from next season will have a 25-player squad cap and also have to introduce a quota on "home-grown" players.

"As of next season clubs will be required to have a squad named of up to 25 players, of which no more than 17 can be over the age of 21 and not home grown," Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore confirmed.

"The definition of home grown is trained for three years under the age of 21 by somebody in the English and Welsh professional system."

"Clubs will have to declare

their 25 at the end of August when the window shuts and then again at the end of January."

Scudamore denied that the move would encourage clubs to hoard young foreign players and claimed the England team would ultimately reap the reward.

"It's not in the club's interests to stockpile players. It will make buying home-grown talent more attractive," he said.

"We're not going down the route of a nationality test but what this will mean is that you just can't buy a team from abroad."

"We think it will give clubs an extra incentive to invest in youth. We think that one of the benefits will be that it will help the England team."

All 20 Premier League mem-

bers also agreed to adhere to a set of financial reporting rules designed to protect the viability and sustainability of the clubs.

"They will all have to annually submit accounts and future financial information," said Scudamore.

"At all times the board of the Premier League will be applying a test which basically says this: can the club fulfil its fixtures, pay off its creditors when they are due and also to meet obligations to the Premier League's contracts and partners?"

"If the board believe a club is at risk of not meeting those obligations, it has to then step in and agree a budget for the running of that club. Any transfers can be embargoed."