All hail Lionel

AFP, Barcelona



Barcelona's Argentinian superstar Lionel Messi's extraordinary one man demolition of English side Arsenal in their Champions CHAMPIONS League quarterfinal second leg here on Tuesday earned leg here on Tuesday earned the player known as 'The Flea' plaudits from friend and foe alike.

The 22-year-old's first ever four goal haul - he had already accrued three hattricks in 2010 - in the 4-1 defeat of Arsenal (6-3 on aggregate) gave

the Champions League holders a date with Italian champions Inter Milan in the semifinals. His performance left all and sundry wide eyed with admiration.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is never one for overdoing praise of players from opposing teams, but the erudite Frenchman had no hesitation at where he placed Messi in the present

pantheon of top players. "He (Messi) is the best player in the world, by a distance," said Wenger, who had also come off second best to Barcelona in the 2006 final.

"He is not always in the game but when he is he is unstoppable. He can change direction at any time and leave his marker or defender going in the opposite direction and chasing air."

For Barcelona president Joan Laporta there was just one term he could use for the world player of the year, who was the sixth player to record a quadruple in a Champions League match and the first since Andrei Shevchenko scored four for AC Milan against Fenerbahce in November 2005.

"There was an incredible genius in this match: Leo (Messi)," said Laporta.

"He finished off his chances in magisterial

Barca coach Pep Guardiola, no mean player himself when he bore the Barcelona colours, paid a handsome tribute to Messi, though, he was also highly complimentary of the lesser lights of the team.

"Messi was out of this world, the difference between the two sides," said the 39-year-old, who won the Champions League as a player with Barcelona in 1992.

"He is a special player, on a different plane to others."

A shell-shocked Arsenal goalkeeper Manuel Almunia - whose stunning saves in the first 10 minutes of the first leg in London last week had effectively kept the match alive - was equally complimentary.

"He is a brilliant player and he was fantastic in this game," said the Spanish goalkeeper.

"As a goalkeeper you try to anticipate what he's going to do but he can do whatever he wants and when he wants to.

"He couldn't score in the first leg but tonight was another matter. He is the best player I have ever faced. I have a bad memory of tonight but he is the best player in the world."

For Danish international striker Nicklas Bendtner, whose early goal proved a false dawn for Arsenal, Messi's performance left him awestruck.

"If you lose a game, you want to lose it against a performance like that," said Bendtner.

"Messi is a phenomenal player."

Arsenal's French defender Mikael Silvestre, who inadvertently created Messi's first goal when the ball cannoned off his shin to the Argentinian, said it was virtually impossible to handle the Barcelona maestro.

"Messi is phenomenal in the way he reads the game and in his movement," said Silvestre, who was somewhat surprisingly chosen ahead of veteran Sol Campbell to start the match.

"For his last goal, that was typical of his whole performance this evening.

"He has moments when he disappears to get a breather, which then readies him for what comes afterwards, when he has the opportunities to get into his stride. It is true he is unstoppable once he gets going on the ball." For Messi, though, his focus had moved on

very quickly from the match.

"I am delighted with this victory," said Messi, whose four goals took his total to 119 for Barcelona.

"However, we have to carry on our work. We have a really important match on Saturday (against Real Madrid who lead them in the title race on goal difference).

"We have to win there even if it is just by one

Spain bows to Messi Cruyff praises the Flea AFP, Barcelona



AFP, Barcelona

The eulogies came cascading down after Lionel Messi's four-goal Nou Camp salvo which destroyed Arsenal in the Champions League.

At 1.69-metre Messi is no physical giant, but like fellow Argentine Diego Maradona

before him, his low centre of gravity and lower body strength make him almost unplayable on current form and Tuesday's showing made him the first player to score four times in a Champions League knockout round.

Marco Van Basten, Simone Inzaghi, Dado Prso, Ruud van Nistelrooy and Andrei Shevchenko had all performed the feat - but only in group matches. Barca's honorary chairman Johan Cruyff also eulogised the Argentine in his column for El

Periodico newspaper. In Cruyff's view what makes Messi great is that

he keeps it simple - but does the simple things with panache. "You see Messi and you think he's doing

impossible things. You seem him move, run, dribble, score and you think - he's a genius, he does the most difficult things. "But that's not it. What's great about Messi is

he does very simple things. Or that he does what appears to us to be difficult simply and coolly," said the Dutch maestro, who led Barce to their first European Cup in 1992.

"Why is he the best player in the world? Because he has the ability to do difficult things

Colourful

without suffering, without getting in a flap. "Leo floats around the pitch. Sometimes you think he isn't there, that he is hiding.

"But he is there. And his opponents knowit." Not that they can do much about it.

Messi pulled Arsenal to pieces with a hattrick inside 21 minutes and a late fourth after Nicklas Bendtner had given Arsenal a shock lead.

Cruyff explained that Messi knows how to contain his energy, then seize the moment to strike like a vulture.

"Nobody at Barca wears himself out less than Leo," opined the Dutch master, adding that with each goal Messi suddenly switched into top gear and ran some 30 to 40 metres before firing home.

"He had reserved himself for those instants." With usual spearhead Zlatan Ibrahimovic out

injured following his two goals in London it fell to Messi to play in a more central role than usual but he was unfazed as he linked with Pedro to his right and Bojan to his left to brilliant effect.

And afterwards, match ball tucked under his arm, the flea who atomised Arsenal, had put his four-goal show mentally to bed to concentrate on the next victims - Real Madrid. "I am very happy with this victory but we have

to keep working - we have a very important match coming up" against domestic title rivals Real at the Bernabeu on Saturday.

Even a workmanlike win will do, the Argentine

"The main thing is to win there - even by a single goal.'

After Real, it will be Inter Milan's turn to try to keep the flea underwraps.

Inter cruise into semis

AFP, Moscow



Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho became first CHAMPIONS man to guide three different clubs to the

Champions League semifinals on Tuesday as Italian champions Inter Milan defeated CSKA Moscow 1-0, 2-0 on aggregate.

An early goal by Dutch playmaker Wesley Sneijder who had been an injury doubt on the eve of the match - set them on their way for their first appearance in the last four in seven years.

Their task was made easier when Nigerian Chidi Odiah was sent-off early in the second-half for a second bookable offence.

Mourinho, who has previously taken Porto and then Chelsea to the last four with the former winning the trophy under him in 2004, could be joined as a coach to have taken three different sides to the last four of the Champions League by Dutchman Louis van Gaal if Bayern Munich beat Manchester United on

Wednesday. Sneijder struck in the sixth minute with a freekick, which while finely struck would not have endangered the CSKA Moscow goal had Japanese international Keisuke Honda not jumped over the ball.

CSKA Moscow goalkeeper Igor Akinfeev vainly stretched out his legs to try and stop it as he was diving the other way but to no avail, and was understandably furious with Honda.

CSKA - who missed their most creative player Milos Krasic as he was suspended rarely threatened to get back on level terms during the first-half with just a neat move which

CSKA Moscow 0 1 Inter Milan Sneijder 6 Inter Milan win 2-0 on aggregate

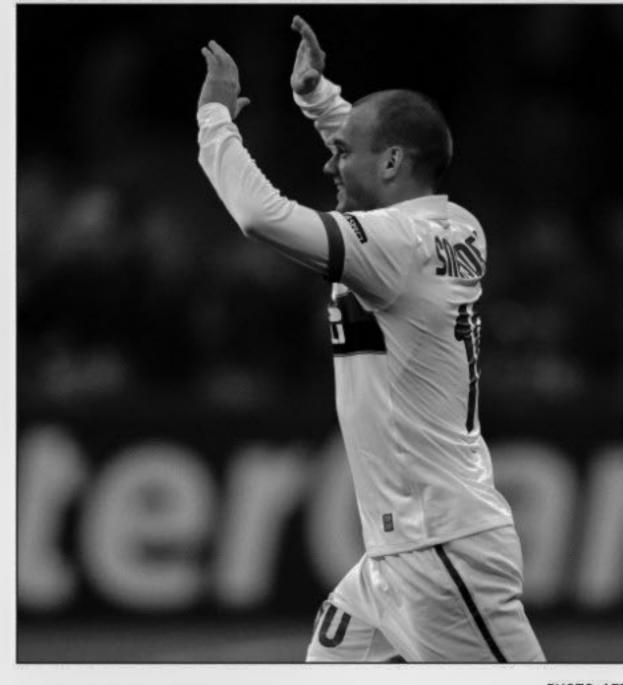
CSKA Moscow: Igor Akinfeev, Deividas Semberas, Sergey Ignashevich, Alexey Berezutsky, A, Vassily Berezutsky, V (Chidi Odiah, 14), Georgy Shennikov, Alan Dzagoyev, Pavel Mamayev, Mark Gonzalez, Keisuke Honda (Elvir Rahimic, 77), Tomas Necid (Milhomem Gusmao Guilherme, 71)

Inter Milan: Julio Cesar, Lucio, Maicon, Walter Samuel, Javier Zanetti, Dejan Stankovic, Wesley Sneijder (Sulley Muntari, 86), Esteban Cambiasso, Samuel Eto'o, Diego Milito (Mario Balotelli, 74), Goran Pandev (Cristian Chivu, 63) Sent off: Odiah 49

saw Tomas Necid go agonisingly close in the 23rd minute with Inter 'keeper Julio Cesar well beaten.

CSKA also put together another dazzling passing move with 10 minutes remaining of

the first period turning the Inter midfield and defence inside out only for Pavel Mamaev to make a complete horlicks of his shot inside the area, the ball going sideways instead of at the Intergoal.



Inter Milan playmaker Wesley Sneijder celebrates his all-important goal against CSKA Moscow during their Champions League quarterfinal at the Luzhniki Stadium on Tuesday.



AFP, Barcelona

The Spanish press on

Wednesday hailed Argentine

star Lionel Messi as a fearless

'Musketeer' the morning after

his four-goal heroics catapulted

Barcelona into the Champions

ural Messi," headlined the daily

with a four-goal anthology

which shot Barca into the semi-

finals where they will meet Inter

(Milan)," the newspaper con-

There is now "just one God,"

wrote El Mundo, quoting Messi's

Mexican teammate Rafael

Marquez who said: "a player like

Messi to a Musketeer trumpet-

newspaper, El Periodico, Messi

has become "the master of

headlined: "No longer say

football, say Messi" and stressed

that this victory "is one further

step towards the final" on May

22 at Real Madrid's Santiago-

dailies - As and Marca - Tuesday night's match was a serious warning for Real Madrid who

host Barca in La Liga on

seeds of terror before El

asked Marca, quoting Real's

Spanish defender Sergio

Ramos, who admitted Messi

Casillas plays

Real Madrid goalkeeper Iker

Casillas has played down the

importance of his side's "El

Classico" clash Saturday against

the table will be strengthened,

but the league is still far from

over," said Casillas after training

game, but it won't be decisive.

Three very important points will

be at stake and our goal is to win

the match. There are still many

ings on goal difference from

Barcelona with eight games

remaining after beating Racing

Santander 2-0 on Sunday --

their 12 successive win in La

goals because we all help out.

Everyone is involved in defend-

ing set pieces. Our quality in

attack can guarantee us to win

games as long as we don't con-

groin strain that has sidelined

but it's a complicated injury,"

"He's getting better slowly,

him a month.

said Casillas.

Real's Brazilian playmaker

cede any strikes," he said.

'We hardly concede any

Real are on top of the stand-

matches and points to win."

"The Clasico will be a great

"The winner's position on

arch-rivals Barcelona.

down Barca

"Messi scares" and "sows the

"How can you stop this guy?"

For Madrid's two big sports

Bernabeu stadium.

Classico," wrote As.

was "a player to fear."

clash

AFP, Madrid

on Tuesday.

Liga.

Saturday.

ing "all for Leo and Leo for all."

The daily El Pais compared

For another big Catalan

The Catalan daily Sport

that arrives every 30 years."

"Europe bows to a supernat-

Messi "blew away Arsenal

League semifinals.

LaVanguardia.

tinued.



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger described the four goal performance of Lionel Messi in Barcelona's destruction of his side in their

Champions League quarterfinal second leg clash as like something out of a computer game. Following the 2-2 draw at the Emirates, Nicklas Bendtner put the Gunners ahead on aggregate before a solo performance from the majestic Messi who bagged his first ever four goal haul the sixth player in Champions League history but the first since Andrei Shevchenko five years ago - as Barca ran out 4-1 winners (6-3 on aggregate).

"Congratulations to Barcelona, they deserved to win over the two legs. They are a good side but Messi makes the difference as he can win the game at any moment. He is like a Playstation player, he can take advantage of every chance," said Wenger, who felt that his side was up against the top side in Europe at the moment.

sively when we had possession of the ball and we paid for it. We are a young team and we can improve a lot.

lacked maturity in the final ball tonight half and that made the difference. (Tuesday). "After we scored our first goal we had a

great chance to score again but we made a bad decision with the final ball. "I don't know if Barcelona will win the

Champions League but they will have their chances especially with players returning. "They are the best side at the moment

but it is a cup and we could have made it very difficult for them." Arsenal can ease their disappointment now by concentrating on the fight for the

Premier League title with their next match

against local rivals Tottenham Hotspur. "We now need to focus on the Premier League and we now go to White Hart Lane which is a place where we have done well before," said Wenger.

"We need to be fully focused but it will be the best thing for us to play a derby."

His Barcelona counterpart Pep Guardiola wanted to emphasise the success of the whole club rather than singling out individuals.

"It is congratulations for the institution as we have now reached the semifinals in the last three years," said the 39-"We made too many mistakes defen- year-old former Barcelona playmaker, who won the Champions League as a player in 1992. "This was a game with two good teams

"The future is very positive but we but we had more possession in the first

"We are extremely pleased at being in

the semi-finals and having achieved this without compromising our style. We press hard and work together even after 70 or 80 minutes and this is decisive.

"Leo (Messi) deserves all the praise he has been given and he is the perfect role model for young players although it would be impossible for them to copy him of course.

"To describe him as someone from

Playstation is a great description but I don't know what level he would be on. "This was a team performance

though and we all play with the same mentality of attacking. Even Victor (Valdes) can do this by throwing the ball out."

He is now expecting a tough semifinal tie with Inter Milan, who they played in the group stage and had earlier reached the last four by beating Russian side CSKA Moscow 1-0 in Moscow, 2-0 on

"They are not the team I would have wanted to face and the fact they have won several leagues in Italy shows how strong they are," said Guardiola.

"Jose Mourinho is the one of the best if not the best coaches around as he has won leagues in Portugal, England and Italy. I am proud to play against him," he

Villa eyes consolation

AFP, Paris



Spanish side endured ing league season even though they lie third in the table as

LEAGUE their hopes of challenging the duopoly of Barcelona and Real Madrid have failed to materi-

The six-time Spanish champions lie a distant 21 points adrift of both Real and Barcelona but their star striker David Villa is looking for a consolation prize in the Europa League, starting by ending Spanish rivals Atletico Madrid's interest in the competition when they meet in the quarterfinal second leg clash on Thursday.

exciting 2-2 draw last week in Valencia, leaving Villa's side the harder task to progress to a potentially delicious meeting with Liverpool, managed by former Valencia handler Rafael Benitez, should the English side overcome a 2-1 deficit to Portuguese giants Benfica.

Villa, who took his total in the Primera Liga this term to 20 on Sunday with two late goals in the 3-0 win over Osasuna, is hopeful that Valencia can repeat the feat that saw them prevail over Werder Bremen in the previous round with a stunning 4-4 draw in Germany in the second leg in which he scored a hat-trick.

"In Germany we took the Kaka, who joined the club from AC Milan for 65 million euros in difficult route and we are capa-June 2009, did not train on ble of repeating that in Tuesday and is in doubt for the Madrid, "Villa told UEFA.com weekend game because of a

score a goal that we can then

"The first leg was frustrating for because we couldn't finish off our chances we created. "We have confidence in our abilities. We believe that if we

defend it and reach the semifi-

While Villa will be Valencia's main weapon, veteran Uruguayan international striker Diego Forlan, who has 16 goals to his name in the Spanish championship this

A Liverpool v Valencia match-up would be a more eye-catching semifinal than the other possibility as Benitez was the last coach who to bring them the title in 2004 the same season that they landed the UEFA Cup, the predecessor of the Europa League.

Benitez, whose hopes of staying in the Liverpool hotseat may hinge more on whether he can get them the fourth and last Champions League spot allocated to the English Premier League sides, has focused more and more on the Europa League as the season has progressed to bring him Both sides played out an some succour.

"The Europa League now is a very, very important trophy for us and we have to win against Benfica," said the Spaniard.

Fulham can make it two English clubs in the last four should they hold on to their 2-1 first leg lead over German champions VfL Wolfsburg in Germany - defeat would be a huge let down after their epic victory over Juventus in the previous round. Fulham manager Roy

Hodgson will travel in a more confident frame of mind if leading goalscorer Bobby Zamora - who scored in the first leg and is an outside bet for the

FIXTURES (all kick-offs 1905GMT)

Liverpool (ENG) v Benfica (POR) Atletico Madrid (ESP) v Valencia, VfL Wolfsburg (GER) v Fulham (ENG), Standard Liege (BEL) v SV Hamburg (GER)

England World Cup finals squad - is fit enough after suffering an Achilles tendon

"The medical staff are optimistic he (Zamora) will recover in time for Thursday, was Hodgson's guarded remark.

The winners of that match will play either another German outfit Hamburg or Belgian side Standard Liege, who host the Germans trailing 2-1 after the first leg.

Vieira hopes for France call

AFP, Paris

Former France captain Patrick Vieira insisted on Tuesday that if he were in the place of France coach Raymond Domenech he would be picked for the World Cup squad.

"Yes of course I would pick Patrick Vieira without any problem. Given his experience, his determination and what he can bring to the France team would pick him," the 33-yearold - a World Cup winner in 1998 - told French television channel Canal Plus.

Vieira, capped 107 times, moved to Manchester City from Inter Milan in a bid to regain his place in Domenech's side in time for this summer's World Cup in South Africa. "The coach knows me very

well, he knows what I'm capable of, he knows there will be enormous preparation before the World Cup and that if I work, why not?" said the midfielder.

World Cup," said Vieira.

"In 2006, I wasn't better than I am now, but the preparation allowed me to have a good

IN BRIEF

Diouf to appear in court

AFP, London

Blackburn striker El-Hadji Diouf will appear in court next month charged with driving offences, the Crown Prosecution Service said on Wednesday.

The 29-year-old Senegalese player was summonsed over allegations that he drove his white Porsche Cavenne without a licence or insurance when stopped by police in Manchester last September.

He is due to appear at Manchester City Magistrates' Court on May 10.

Larsson denies Celtic link

AFP, Glasgow

Former Swedish international Henrik Larsson on Wednesday distanced himself from a return to Celtic as manager.

The Swede, who is cur-

"I will always be con-

"But I don't think it's fair to

rently boss of Swedish side BOIS Landskrona, has been tipped as one of the candidates for the job after Tony Mowbray's exit. But he said the time was not the right time for a return.

nected with that Celtic job. It doesn't matter what I say, it's a great honour to be connected with that job," he told the Scottish Daily Mail.

speak about another man's job, either, and that is why I have refused to say too much. "The future will tell if it will

beornot." The job is currently being

filled by former team-mate Neil Lennon on an interim basis.