

Messi shines in win

Football

AFP, Seoul
Lionel Messi scored a quick-fire double as Barcelona cruised to a convincing 5-2 win over the K-League All Stars in a friendly at Seoul World Cup Stadium Wednesday.

The Argentinian superstar made his pre-season debut halfway into the game and scored two quick goals, giving his team the spark it needed to notch up an impressive victory.

Barca, dressed in the famous turquoise-coloured strip, looked rusty out of the blocks and were punished after a minute as Choi Sung-Guk scored the opening goal for the K-League All-Stars.

It did not take long for Barcelona to respond, however, as Zlatan Ibrahimovic conjured an equaliser in the sixth minute.

Messi was brought on in the 29th minute to loud applause from the 32,581 crowd.

But his introduction did not stop the K-League All Stars regaining the lead through a header from Lee Dong-Gook in the 36th minute.

That advantage proved short-lived as Messi showed his skills scoring off a pass from Eduard Oriol Garcia in the 42nd minute.

The diminutive Argentinian struck again three minutes later to give his team a one-goal lead at the end of the first half.

Messi and Ibrahimovic sat out the second

half but a Barcelona team consisting of reserve players came out in full control and dominated possession with crisp passing.

The K-League All Stars managed to create a few chances but Victor Sanchez Mata added a goal in the 80th minute and Eduard Oriol Garcia scored three minutes later.

Messi's appearance in the friendly had been in doubt.

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola had said Tuesday that Messi -- whose World Cup ended in disappointment as Argentina were humbled 4-0 by Germany in the quarter-finals -- would not feature as he had just returned from holiday and was not match-fit.

However, following a hastily-arranged meeting with the promoters, the Catalan club issued a statement saying that Messi would play a role after all.

"The promoters of the tournament and Barcelona representatives held a meeting in which the matter of Leo Messi playing in the match was raised," read the statement.

"In the light of the good progress shown by the player in the last training session and that there will be another one before the match, the coaching staffs believe that it is fine for the Argentinian striker to play for a few minutes of the match."

Comments in the Spanish press claimed that Messi's appearance came only because he was compelled to play for at least half-an-hour under the terms of the tournament contract -- otherwise Barcelona would receive no money.



Barcelona star Lionel Messi (R) scores one of his two goals past South Korea All-Star goalkeeper Jung Sung Ryong during their exhibition match at the World Cup Stadium in Seoul yesterday. Barcelona won 5-2.

Syrian wants L'pool

AFP, London



Syrian businessman Yahya Kirdi claims he is close to sealing a takeover of Premier League giants Liverpool.

Chinese businessman Kenny Huang emerged on Tuesday as the latest of several potential buyers to submit a bid to buy the club, which is owned by Americans Thomas Hicks and George Gillett.

On Wednesday Kirdi, who represents a group of investors from the Middle East and Canada, claimed a price has been agreed and a formal purchase agreement "is in the final stage of negotiation".

A statement from Kirdi said: "The group is in advanced negotiations with Thomas Hicks and George Gillett, co-owners of Liverpool Football Club, to purchase 100 percent of the club.

"Agreement has been reached on all major terms including the purchase price, repayment of the existing bank debt from RBS (Royal Bank of Scotland) and Wells Fargo and financing of a new stadium in Liverpool's Stanley Park.

"A formal purchase agreement between the parties is in the final stage of negotiation."

Kirdi's claims, however, are being treated with caution.

His representatives made similar claims in April when no deal was done, and he has been dealing with Hicks and Gillett rather than Liverpool chairman Martin Broughton, who has been detailed to sell the club.

Kirdi is a resident of Canada and a former Syria international who oversees investments in Europe and North America on behalf of his investor group, said the statement.

"Liverpool is a massive football club with passionate and proud fans in Merseyside and in every part of the world," said Kirdi.

"With additional money to improve the

squad and financing in place to build the new stadium, LFC will be on a solid foundation to compete in the Premiership and in Europe for years to come."

Keith Harris, head of investment bank Seymour Pierce, told Sky Sports News there are still other interested parties looking at the club.

"All I am prepared to say is we've looked at it very carefully on behalf of would-be buyers, who we know are very serious, we know are cash-rich, we know have the right incentive to do it, the right motivation to do it, and are prepared to take a long-term view," Harris said.

"I can't say any more at the moment. We have represented a buyer in the past and that is an ongoing situation."

Huang on Tuesday expressed his interest in assuming control of the Reds, with suggestions he would seek to acquire the club's 237-million-pound (285-million-euro) debt from principal lender the Royal Bank of Scotland.

However, Broughton, who was brought into the club in April to facilitate a sale, revealed there had been "several" bids for the Reds and insisted the decision over the sale will be made by the Liverpool board.

"Any bids that go straight to RBS - and there have been several - come to me and are directed to Barcap (Barclays Capital)," he told the Guardian.

"RBS are not involved. The control remains with the board."

Broughton added: "It still remains the objective to conclude a deal before the end of the transfer window (August 31).

"That remains the objective but there are no deadlines, and we will continue working to complete the process.

"Both (owners) George Gillett and Tom Hicks remain on the board and they have given commitments that the board of Kop Holdings (Liverpool's UK parent company) is the party that is responsible for the sale."

Bayern blame Dutch for Robben injury

REUTERS, Berlin

Angry Bayern Munich accused the Netherlands of allowing Arjen Robben to play at the World Cup with an injury after announcing the striker would miss the first two months of the Bundesliga season on Tuesday.

Bayern said on their web site (www.fcbayern.t-home.de) that a routine pre-season exam had shown that Robben had a torn muscle in his left thigh, adding he had suffered the injury shortly before the World Cup.

Robben played throughout the World Cup campaign, helping the Dutch reach the final where they lost 1-0 to Spain after extra-time.

"This is a severe injury," club doctor Hans-Wilhelm Mueller-Wohlfahrt told the club's web site (www.fcbayern.t-home.de).

"I find it irresponsible that this injury has not been precisely diagnosed and that they have let Arjen play."

Robben was quoted as saying: "It's a shock for me to get a diagnosis like this on my return. I'm very disappointed, this absence is bitter for me and for the time."

Club president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge was also upset.

"Naturally, Bayern Munich are angry," he said. "Once again, we as a club must pay the bill after a player has been severely injured with his national team."

Zidane set for charity reunion

AFP, Nantes

Zinedine Zidane and Lilian Thuram are set to make a rare appearance for France in a charity match which will pit the 1998 world champions against a European select side.

Like most of France's World Cup winners, Zidane and Thuram have both retired from the game.

But the pair will become 'Bleus' for the day on Sunday in a match held to raise funds for victims of severe flooding and the violent 'Xynthia' windstorms, which combined left 70 people dead.

Zidane and Thuram will roll back the years and be joined by Bixente Lizarazu, Christian Karembeu, Fabien Barthez, David Trezeguet in a team that will be captained by Didier Deschamps, who is now coach of Marseille.

France '98 coach Aime Jacquet will return with former assistant Roger Lemerre while recently appointed France coach, Laurent Blanc, is also scheduled to make an appearance.

Former striker Thierry Henry, who recently joined New York Red Bulls, will not be at Nantes' Stade Beaujoire for the match.

The funds raised, which are estimated to be in the region of 500,000 euros, will go to help victims of the violent 'Xynthia' windstorms which crossed western Europe in late February 2010 and which hit France particularly hard.

EPL to invest in youth

AFP, London



The English Premier League (EPL) is contemplating the creation of "football schools" in a bid to improve the standard of the England national team.

EPL chief executive Richard Scudamore insisted his organisation had "suffered" as a result of England's early World Cup exit and wanted to do something to address the issue of youth development.

"What we can't do is have a knee-jerk reaction and alter everything we do, but it hurts us as much as it hurts anybody and we do suffer," Scudamore said on Wednesday.

"It absolutely strengthens our resolve in terms of youth development and to make sure that the maximum number of young English players are identified to give the England team the best chance."

One possible change could involve the creation of 'football schools', which will see youth academies associated with top-flight clubs extending to 15-20 hours of coaching for their nine to 16-year-olds instead of the current five hours per week.

That increase would bring English academies into line with European counterparts such as the Netherlands.

The plan was spawned following a review of Ged Roddy, the Premier League's director of youth development, and was agreed by the 20

clubs before England's failure at the World Cup.

However, Scudamore insisted there were not too many foreign players in the Premier League.

"It's not an acceptance that we have to do something about the foreign players, it's the opposite: if you are going to make it as an English player into our first teams you have got to be world class.

"There were 222 English-qualified players who played first-team football in the Premier League last season and we believe that is enough to find 11 to perform in international competition.

"What we really want is an England manager who is spoilt for choice."

He added: "I can envisage a day where in the north west of England we have a Premier League school where a number of clubs have their boys.

"Or perhaps a sports school in London where a number of sports get together and have a school for elite athletes whether it be swimmers, runners, rugby players or whatever."

Britain's Department for Education said they would be happy to talk to the Premier League about setting up a school.

A DFE spokesperson said: "We want every child to have a premier league education and would be very happy to talk to the Premier League about setting up schools in communities across the country, where there is a local need.

"We would be delighted if they joined the hundreds of passionate and talented groups that care about raising standards for all children and are interested in setting up new schools."

'Yossi smarter than Joe'

SOCCERNET

Carlo Ancelotti has criticised Chelsea outcast Joe Cole's tactical nous, saying new signing Yossi Benayoun is a superior option because unlike Cole, Benayoun "understands what I tell him".

Cole has signed for Liverpool after being released by Chelsea while Benayoun, a similar player in terms of position, went the other way in a move worth £5.5 million.

Ancelotti is hoping to make more moves in the transfer market before the transfer window closes on August 31, but having had some time to work with Benayoun on the training pitch he is confident he has improved his squad with the swap of attacking midfielders.

"Joe Cole is quicker than Benayoun but Yossi is better tactically. He understands what I tell him," Ancelotti said in quotes in the Sun. "Yossi is a very intelligent player."

Fiorentina suffer Jovetic blow

REUTERS, Milan

Fiorentina forward Stevan Jovetic has been ruled out for at least six months after suffering a cruciate knee ligament injury, the Serie A club said in a statement on Wednesday.

The shaggy-haired Montenegrin, who will have surgery following the injury in pre-season training, was a key part of the side which made the Champions League last 16 last term.

His loss is a big blow to the Florence club, who now only have Alberto Gilardino available as a recognised frontman given Adrian Mutu is out until October because of a drugs ban.

Fiorentina may now have to enter the transfer market having said on Tuesday that no more deals would be done before the Aug. 29 kickoff after pulling out of an agreement to sign Liverpool left back Emiliano Insua.

Zenit complete Alves swoop

SOCCERNET

Zenit St Petersburg have signed Portugal defender Bruno Alves from Porto for a fee of £22 million, as they look to cement their position at the top of the Russian Premier League.

Alves, 28, won four league titles and three domestic cups during a five-year spell with Porto, but has now moved on to pastures new, joining international team-mates Danny and Fernando Meira at the Petrovsky Stadium.

Zenit are unbeaten in 15 games this season and sit nine points clear of second-place CSKA Moscow, with the signing of Alves likely to help strengthen the 2008 UEFA Cup winners' position atop the table.



Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard gestures during a training session at Melwood yesterday. Liverpool take on Rabotnicki Skopje from Macedonia in their Europa League third qualifier round today.

Marseille won't sell Niang

AFP, Paris



French champions Marseille insist that Senegalese striker Mamadou Niang will not be granted his wish to join Turkish giants Fenerbahce -- at least not this season.

Marseille reacted defiantly to reports last Sunday which claimed Niang was set to complete an eight-million euros move to the Istanbul side, with a contract offer of three to four years worth 2.5 million euros annually.

Niang's French League-topping 18 goals helped the south-coast side, which is coached by Didier Deschamps, to a long-awaited league crown in 2010.

On Tuesday club president Jean-Claude Dassier offered a compromise, saying he would be prepared to pave the way for Niang to leave for Turkey next season.

But Dassier said it would be "suicidal" to sell the highly-rated striker only three days before Marseille begin their title defence in a league opener against Caen.

"Fenerbahce's offer has come in so late that it would be suicidal for us to respond positively only three days before the start of the championship," Dassier told L'Equipe on Wednesday.

"We wouldn't have someone to replace him. I'm happy to guarantee Mamadou a written clause in his contract which would allow him to leave the club after next season."

Niang's contract with Marseille does not expire until 2014.