

Virtuoso Messi

REUTERS, Madrid



Lionel Messi's seemingly endless love affair with the Champions League continued with another virtuoso two-goal performance on Wednesday for Barcelona.

Two typically ruthless finishes earned the 2009 champions a 2-0 Group D victory over FC Copenhagen to propel Barcelona a point clear of the Danes at the top of the standings with seven from a possible nine after three games.

Messi once again proved the difference for his club as he has so often already this season after what was, by his sky-high standards, a wretched World Cup for Argentina in June.

Top scorer in last season's Champions League, the forward netted his third goal of the latest edition in the 19th minute when he controlled a pass from Andres Iniesta and lashed the ball into the top left corner from just outside the area.

The home side controlled the rest of the match comfortably enough but lacked their usual cutting edge and Messi had to wait until second-half added time for his second of the night and 27th in 35 Champions League games over the last four seasons.

A miscued shot from fullback Eric Abidal bounced over Johan Wiland and fell to Messi, who bundled it over the line with the Copenhagen keeper stranded.

"Although we had control, the murmurs in the stands were because we didn't kill off the game and we could have ended up with only a point," Barca coach Pep Guardiola said at a news conference.

"We simply didn't put the ball in the net (in the first half)," he added. "But that's the way it is sometimes and we played a good

match overall."

With Xavi suffering from an ankle problem, Guardiola left the Spain playmaker out of his starting 11 and fielded Javier Mascherano, Sergio Busquets and Maxwell across the midfield.

Andres Iniesta was deployed just behind forwards Messi and David Villa and Spain striker Villa almost grabbed the lead in the fifth minute when he twisted and turned inside the area before curling a shot against the crossbar.

Copenhagen, who had never beaten a Spanish club in six previous meetings, posed more of a threat in the second half and the impressive Dame N'Doye gave Barca's Spain central defenders Gerard Pique and Carles Puyol a torrid time.

The Senegalese striker came close to a shock equaliser in the 67th when he cracked the ball against the bar from distance and Barca goalkeeper Jose Manuel Pinto, playing in place of the unwell Victor Valdes, had to be alert to deal with a long-range effort from Copenhagen captain William Kvist in the 87th.

Barca fullback Daniel Alves struck a post with a low drive two minutes later before Messi's second killed off the game.

"In the second half we managed to get a good rhythm and we had some chances," Copenhagen coach Stale Solbakken, who cut an animated figure on the touchline, told a news conference.

"The players can be proud of their performance. They were facing the best team in the world."

With three of six matches played, Barca have seven points and Copenhagen are second on six. Rubin Kazan, who held Barca 1-1 at home on matchday two, have two points and Panathinaikos one after the pair drew 0-0 in Athens on Wednesday.



Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi (C) is about to score the opening goal from a powerful shot during their Champions League encounter against Copenhagen at Nou Camp on Wednesday.

Raul makes history

AFP, Gelsenkirchen



Spanish striker Raul made history on Wednesday as Bundesliga strugglers Schalke 04 kept up their Champions League hopes of a place in the Round of 16 with a 3-1 win over Hapoel Tel Aviv.

The veteran 33-year-old forward opened the scoring after just three minutes and it gave him his 67th goal in the Champions League before he added a second to take his overall tally to a record 70 in all European competition.

Compatriot Jose Manuel Jurado hit the third to complete the rout.

"For him (Raul), it was a relief to get those goals, he was under fire and it was good for him to show how strong he is in front of goal," said Schalke coach Felix Magath.

"It was good for us that we scored some nice goals and played some good football.

"It will give us a confidence boost, we have always played well in the Champions League, but now we need to concentrate on the league."

Schalke dominated Hapoel until the visitors grabbed a consolation goal with the last kick of the game when forward Etey Schachter scored from a simple tap in the third minute of extra time after a mistake in the Schalke defence.

The Royal Blues may be third from bottom of the Bundesliga, but with six points from three games they are now second in Group B behind leaders Lyon, who beat Benfica 2-0 on Wednesday.

Hapoel are bottom of the table and pointless after their third defeat.

Schalke dominated their

Israeli opponents at the Veltins Arena in Gelsenkirchen with Dutch striker Klaas Jan Huntelaar going close with a string of chances and he was a constant threat.

A pass from Huntelaar sent Raul through one-on-one with Tel Aviv goalkeeper Vincent Enyeama and the former Real Madrid striker made no mistake after just three minutes.

Raul doubled the hosts on 58 minutes with a simple finish after substitute Ivan Rakitic had exchanged passes

with Huntelaar and the Spaniard just had to roll the ball across the line.

Spanish midfielder Jurado then secured the points for Schalke with a superbly-taken third on 68 minutes.

The Spaniard shifted the ball on to his right foot and made enough space for himself to curl a shot around the defence and in off the far post before Schechter pulled one back for the guests.

In the next round of matches, Schalke travel to Tel Aviv on November 2.



Schalke's veteran striker Raul kisses his ring after scoring one of his two goals against Hapoel Tel Aviv during their Champions League tie at the Veltins-Arena Stadium on Wednesday.

Terry wants Rooney

AFP, London

John Terry admits Wayne Rooney would be the ideal signing for Chelsea if the unsettled Manchester United striker is allowed to quit Old Trafford.

Rooney sent shockwaves through the football world this week when he revealed he would not extend his stay at United beyond the end of his current contract, which expires at the end of next season.

The 24-year-old claimed a lack of assurances over United's ability to improve the squad to ensure they can still compete for major honours was behind his decision to end talks over a new contract.

Given the spending power of Chelsea's billionaire owner Roman Abramovich, the Premier League champions are one of the few clubs who could afford Rooney and Terry knows a swoop for his England team-mate would improve Carlo Ancelotti's squad.

"Wayne is the best young player in the world. I am no different to any other player in saying that," Terry said.

"You obviously have to respect Manchester United and Wayne, but who knows what's going to happen.

"We've got a great squad of players and he would add to that and strengthen the squad. He is the best player in the world for me."

French striker Nicolas Anelka, a team-mate of Terry's at Chelsea, agrees that his club should do everything to sign Rooney - even though he would be a direct rival for his place in the team.

"If he wants to come to Chelsea he would be very welcome," Anelka said. "Would I buy him? Of course I would, he's a good player."

Brazil set to recall Ronnie

INTERNET

Milan star Ronaldinho is set to win back his place in the Brazilian national team for the country's friendly match against arch-rivals Argentina, according to Brazil coach Mano Menezes.

Despite having made last summer's 30-man provisional squad, the former World Player of the Year was eventually overlooked by previous boss Dunga.

But new coach Mano Menezes has revealed he is interested in bringing back the 30-year-old former Barcelona ace to the fold.

Menezes said: "I think that I am going to recall Ronaldinho for the friendly match that we have to play against Argentina.

"He is adapting very well to his new position in his team. I saw him personally in the match that Milan defeated Chievo 3-0 and he played very well.

"In addition, I even saw him in a training session last Sunday, I spoke with him and I saw him very motivated for playing again for the Brazilian national team."

South America's giant duo Brazil and Argentina are set to clash in Qatar on November 17.

Players can cope sans Rooney

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United stars have reacted to Wayne Rooney's shock revelation that he wants to leave Old Trafford by insisting they can cope without the England striker.

Rooney on Wednesday admitted he won't extend his stay at United beyond the end of his current contract, which expires at the end of next season.

The 24-year-old says a lack of assurances over United's ability to improve the squad to ensure they can still compete for major honours was behind his decision to end talks over a new contract.

Reports suggest Rooney has also angered United by demanding wages of 150,000 pounds (236,291 dollars) a week after tax and he could even be sold in the January transfer window.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson was due to meet the club's chief executive David Gill on Thursday to decide their next move but a transfer to Manchester City, Chelsea, Real Madrid or Barcelona looks likely.

Rooney's team-mates were happy to

have their say about his attack on United's lack of ambition after their 1-0 win over Bursaspor in the Champions League on Wednesday.

And United left-back Patrice Evra had no qualms about telling Rooney to leave if he isn't enjoying life at Old Trafford.

"If one player in the team doesn't trust the others he should not play in the team," Evra told the London Evening Standard. "Me, I'm not in that point. I trust everyone and I know we can win."

"It's true no one wants to lose Wayne Rooney, he is one of our best players. But I'm not Wayne, I'm not Manchester United or Sir Alex Ferguson. I can't answer for him."

"I think the target here is to win back the title and we're focused on that. I've been here four years and when we didn't win the league last year I was so upset because at United you need to win every time; that's the pressure we have. If a player is not happy with that pressure he should go."

United captain Nemanja Vidic wants the situation resolved to avoid any further distractions.

"When he (Rooney) is going around talking about the bad performances or something happening around the club, it

is not good for the players and not good for the team," Vidic said.

"It has happened before because players will always negotiate with the club about their contract and there has been so much talking in the papers. We are just trying to train and not speak too much."

United midfielder Darren Fletcher is confident United can cope with Rooney's departure, in the same way they responded well to the past sales of stars like David Beckham, Paul Ince and Ruud van Nistelrooy.

"There's been a few instances of big players leaving Manchester United in the past but Manchester United goes on," Fletcher said.

"It's the biggest club in the world. So you have to keep going and respond. The fans don't let you settle for anything other than winning."

"All this can be a distraction but we can't let it be like that. We have to focus and trust the manager. As players we have to believe in the manager."

"We have got a lot of young and exciting players and it might be a chance for someone to take on that mantle. When great players go, young players step up to the mark. We have seen that with Nani this year."

MU to hold crisis meeting

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson was to hold a crisis

meeting with club officials here Thursday, seeking a swift end to the saga of Wayne Rooney's departure.

Ferguson and United chief executive David Gill were holding talks, one day after superstar Rooney confirmed his intention to quit the English giants.

On Wednesday, Rooney, 24, said he was leaving because he believed the club was no longer able to match his ambition by being able to compete in the transfer market for the world's best players.

Rooney's comments effectively slammed shut any chance of the striker being able to settle his differences with the club after Ferguson said on Tuesday the door was still open to a solution.

A furious Ferguson reacted by telling reporters following United's 1-0 Champions League victory over Bursaspor that the club had called a meeting in order to "put the issue to bed".

"We don't want it to carry on. We don't want it to become a saga. We've got the team to consider," Ferguson said.

"That's going to be the end of it tomorrow (Thursday). We'll carry on and dismiss everything else. We'll put it to bed tomorrow."

Ferguson said Gill had spoken to United's American owners, the Glazer family, ahead of the meeting.

"David (Gill) has spoken to the owners tonight, which is important," Ferguson said. "And what is really important is for us to put this to bed."

Ferguson did not speculate

on what course of action he may take but it now seems likely that Rooney has played his last game in a United shirt and that the club will seek to sell him as soon as the January transfer window opens.

Rooney, the figurehead of the United team and one of the world's most talented footballers, had stunned his employers by breaking off negotiations over a new contract and informing them he wished to leave.

With only 18 months left to run on his current 90,000 pounds (140,000 dollars) per week deal, United are now likely to offload Rooney as quickly as possible before his value, around 50 million pounds (79 million dollars), begins to depreciate.

Rooney would be able to leave United for free if he saw out the remainder of his contract.

Most reports have said that

Manchester United's arch local rivals, Manchester City, are the favourites to sign Rooney.

City, owned by Abu Dhabi billionaire Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, would comfortably be able to pay both the 50-million-pound transfer fee and Rooney's salary demands, expected to be more than 200,000 pounds (316,000 dollars) per week.

Ferguson also warned Rooney that any move to a new club was unlikely to be an improvement on United, where he has already accumulated eight major trophies in the six years since he signed from Everton as a teenager in 2004.

"Sometimes you look in a field and you see a cow and you think it's a better cow than the one you've got in your own field," Ferguson remarked.

"And it never really works out that way. It's probably the same cow or not as good as

your own cow. Some players like to think that it's better somewhere else. It never really works."

While the football world waits to discover Rooney's fate, his team-mates are trying to block out the controversy as they focus on Sunday's Premier League trip to Stoke.

United are already five points behind leaders Chelsea and England midfielder Michael Carrick is well aware his team can't afford to be distracted by the Rooney saga as they try to stay in touch with the champions.

"You have to distance yourself from it. You have no choice," Carrick said.

"Obviously, the player and the club are huge, not just in England but around the world. It's big news."

"But we can only control what happens out on the pitch. That is all we can focus on."

FIFA punishes OFC

Football

AFP, Wellington

The Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) said on Thursday it needed time to "absorb" FIFA's decision to suspend two of its most senior officials over an alleged World Cup vote-selling scandal.

World football's governing body on Wednesday provisionally suspended OFC president Reynald Temarii and Tonga Football Association general secretary Ahongalu Fusimalohi following an expose in a British newspaper.

The pair were among six officials suspended after FIFA's ethics committee in Zurich viewed more than 90 minutes of video recordings obtained by undercover Sunday Times journalists posing as bid lobbyists.

They are both members of the OFC's eight-member executive committee, which oversees football in the region.

The Auckland-based OFC -- which consists mainly of Pacific island nations -- was tight-lipped about the suspensions as it came to terms with the officials' alleged involvement in a scandal that has rocked world football.

"In alignment with the provisional decisions taken by the FIFA ethics committee today in Zurich, Switzerland, OFC will take time to absorb the information and make no comment until further notice," it said.

The 11-nation OFC is the poorest and weakest of FIFA's six global confederations.

It is not allocated an automatic place in the World Cup, meaning its strongest team, usually

New Zealand, must qualify through a play-off with a team from another confederation.

However, as OFC president, Temarii sits on the FIFA executive committee and has a vote in determining which country hosts the showcase tournament.

The Sunday Times alleged it covertly filmed Temarii demanding three million New Zealand dollars (2.3 million US) to set up a sports academy in Auckland in return for his support.

Temarii, a Tahitian who once played for French club FC Nantes, denied any wrongdoing ahead of the FIFA suspension.

Fusimalohi, a former journalist, said earlier this week that undercover reporters posing as lobbyists targeted him at a meeting in an Auckland hotel four weeks ago but he soon realised they were fake.

Fusimalohi said he played along with the reporters, discussing receiving a 100,000 US dollar board membership to support one country's bid, in an attempt to discover what they were up to.

"I found it like a joke, enjoying lying to them, because they were lying to me as well," he told Radio NZ.

Australia, an OFC member until it switched to the Asian confederation in 2006, agreed to provide four million dollars (3.0 million US) in development funding to the OFC last year.

Football Federation Australia said the suspensions had not affected the development programme and it was "confident FIFA will come up with the right actions".

A spokeswoman for Australian Sports Minister Mark Arbib said FIFA had taken decisive action and the government was awaiting the final findings of the organisation's investigation.



Manchester United winger Nani (L) tries to outrun Bursaspor defender Gokcek Vederson (R) during their Champions League clash at Old Trafford on Wednesday.