

# Messi magic lifts Argentina

Football

AFP, Doha

A brilliant solo goal in injury time by Lionel Messi earned Argentina a 1-0 victory over their arch-rivals Brazil in an international friendly here on Wednesday.

The Barcelona superstar picked up the ball midway inside the Brazil half and weaved past four defenders before firing a low shot into the bottom-right corner with just a minute of added time to play.

It was Messi's first ever goal against Brazil and allowed Argentina to record their first win against their old enemies since June 2005.

His strike also allowed coach Sergio Batista to celebrate victory in his first game in charge since he was confirmed as the long-term successor to Diego Maradona.

For Brazil it was a first defeat in four matches for new coach Mano Menezes, who had led his country to victories in his first three matches at the helm and had not previously seen his team concede a goal.

Both South American giants are rebuilding after disappointing World Cups and they will resume hostilities in La Plata, Argentina on December 19.

The Albiceleste were second-best for much of the first half, as Brazil impressed with their slick approach play, and Batista will have been delighted to secure a famous win after the 1-0 loss to Japan in their previous outing.

AC Milan forward Ronaldinho was making his first Brazil appearance since April 2009 and although he illuminated the game with some classy touches, he could not prise open the Argentine defence.

Clattering tackles were a recurring feature of the encounter and a glut of second-half substi-

tutions seemed set to usher the game towards an anti-climactic conclusion.

A pitch invader who completed a hasty circuit of the pitch raised the crowd from their slumber with 10 minutes to play and Messi's magical intervention made sure that a forgettable encounter concluded in unforgettable fashion.

Messi's early touches had drawn roars of encouragement from the crowd, but the reigning World and European Footballer of the Year initially found his route to goal blocked by the imposing form of Benfica centre-back David Luiz.

Brazil's twinkle-toed attacking triumvirate of Robinho, Ronaldinho and 18-year-old Santos starlet Neymar quickly demonstrated their understanding and the early chances of note all fell to the five-time world champions.

Dani Alves cracked a shot against the crossbar after a one-two with Luiz, while Ronaldinho tested goalkeeper Sergio Romero with an instinctive back-heel following a corner from Neymar that was only partially cleared.

Messi grazed the left-hand post with a rasping shot shortly before half-time, but Brazil goalkeeper Victor's only prior involvement had been a double save from Gonzalo Higuain rendered irrelevant by the linesman's flag.

Napoli striker Ezequiel Lavezzi added industry and energy to the Argentine attack after replacing Higuain at the interval.

He scampered down the right flank early in the second half before teeing up club-mate Javier Pastore, but although the midfielder's strike appeared to hit Thiago Silva on the arm, the referee was unmoved.

Brazil were then aggrieved when the referee played advantage after Neymar was chopped down on the edge of the Argentina box, as Robinho had strayed into an offside position and the flag went up when the ball came to him.



Argentina superstar Lionel Messi celebrates his all-important goal against Brazil during their international friendly at the Khalifa Stadium in Doha on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

# Portugal stun Spain

Football

REUTERS, London

World champions Spain suffered their worst defeat for 47 years as Portugal hammered their neighbours 4-0 in a Lisbon friendly arranged to promote the countries' joint World Cup bid on Wednesday. In another big derby, played in neutral Qatar, Argentina beat Brazil 1-0 courtesy of a stoppage-time Lionel Messi special.

The heavyweight clashes were the stand-out matches on a night of almost 40 friendlies around the world, where swathes of debutants stepped into the international limelight as their coaches took the opportunity to experiment.

There were a clutch of impressive away wins in Europe as France beat England 2-1 at Wembley, Belgium upset Russia 2-0, Norway overcame Ireland 2-1 and Greece defeated Austria 2-1.

World Cup runners-up Netherlands beat Turkey 1-0 but several of Europe's other big guns failed to ignite.

Germany were held to a goalless draw in Sweden, Italy, with four debutants, drew 1-1 with Romania in Austria in a game marred by racist chanting from Italian fans, while Denmark against Czech Republic also ended 0-0.

In the night's two Euro 2012 qualifiers, Croatia beat Malta 3-0 and Finland thrashed San Marino 8-0.

The World Cup is becoming a distant memory for Spain, who since their July triumph have lost 4-1 to Argentina and made hard work of beating Scotland in a Euro 2012 qualifier.

Spain beat Portugal 1-0 in the second round in South Africa but, despite having a near-full strength side, they were outclassed and slipped to their worst defeat since Scotland beat them 6-2 in 1963.

Carlos Martins just before the break and

Helder Postiga with a backheeled goal just after, put the hosts in control.

A second for Postiga and Hugo Almeida's stoppage-time fourth had the home fans in dreamland and brought a sudden halt to the pre-match bid-boosting back-slapping.

France continued their rehabilitation under Laurent Blanc by outplaying an inexperienced England team and handing them their first home defeat under Fabio Capello.

Karim Benzema and Mathieu Valbuena finished off good passing moves to put the visitors 2-0 up before substitute Peter Crouch maintained his remarkable scoring record with his 22nd goal in 42 internationals seconds after coming on at the death.

Klaas-Jan Huntelaar is another on a hot streak as he headed his ninth in five internationals to secure Netherlands' win.

The Dutch had only five survivors from their World Cup final team while Turkey coach Guus Hiddink gave five players their debuts.

Seventeen-year-old Belgium striker Romelu Lukaku added to his burgeoning reputation by scoring both goals, his first in internationals, in the win over Russia in Voronezh.

Another 17-year-old had a night to remember in Cape Town as debutant Juan Agudelo scored five minutes from time to give a makeshift United States team a 1-0 win over South Africa.

Croatia marked the 20th anniversary of their first match as an independent nation by beating Malta 3-0 with two long-range goals for Niko Kranjcar and one for Nikola Kalinic to go top of Group F, two points ahead of Greece and four ahead of Georgia.

Mikael Forssell hit a second-half hat-trick as Finland hammered San Marino 8-0 in Group E but, having lost their first three matches, they remain the longest of qualifying shots.

## RESULTS

<b>Portugal 4</b> (Martins 45, Ramos 49-og, H. Postiga 68, H. Almeida 90+3)	<b>Spain 0</b>
<b>England 1</b> (Crouch 85)	<b>France 2</b> (Benzema 16, Valbuena 55)
<b>Austria 1</b> (Fuchs 67)	<b>Greece 2</b> (Samaras 49, Fotakis 81)
<b>The Netherlands 1</b> (Huntelaar 52)	<b>Turkey 0</b>
<b>Sweden 0</b>	<b>Germany 0</b>
<b>Italy 1</b> (Quagliarella 82)	<b>Romania 1</b> (Marica 34)
<b>Switzerland 2</b> (Frei 40, 63)	<b>Ukraine 2</b> (Aliyev 62, Konoplianka 75)
<b>Poland 3</b> (Lewandowski 19, 79, Obraniak 65)	<b>Ivory Coast 1</b> (Gervinho 45+1)
<b>Denmark 0</b>	<b>Czech Republic 0</b>
<b>Russia 0</b>	<b>Belgium 2</b> (Lukaku 2, 73)
<b>Slovakia 2</b> (Sebo 3, Grajciar 64)	<b>Bosnia-Herzegovina 3</b> (Medunjanin 28, Planic 50, Dzeko 60)

## Mathijsen out for several weeks

AFP, Berlin

Hamburg's injury problems have deepened with the news Dutch centre-back Joris Mathijsen looks set to be out for several weeks after suffering a serious leg injury in Holland's 1-0 win over Turkey.

The 30-year-old defender was left in obvious pain after competing for a ball and had to be put in a plaster cast at hospital in Amsterdam.

Mathijsen was flown back to Hamburg after Wednesday's game, but a scan has been delayed for several days until the swelling goes down.

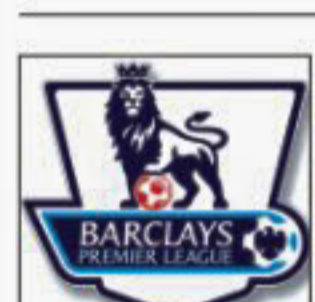
Mathijsen has been Hamburg's stalwart in defence and in the past four seasons has missed only seven German league games.

Hamburg coach Armin Veh had nine players missing through injury from last Friday's defeat at Dortmund, so the latest news is a further set back to his side who are ninth in the Bundesliga.

Schalke striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar scored the winner for Holland in the 52nd minute.

# Gunners' Spurs challenge

AFP, London



Arsenal take on Tottenham in the latest instalment of their bitter North London rivalry here Saturday in a Premier League showdown neither side can afford to lose.

After five years without a trophy, Arsenal are daring to dream of a sustained title challenge as Chelsea and Manchester United struggle to find the consistency which has made the league a two-horse race in recent seasons.

A victory over Spurs in Saturday's lunchtime kick-off will see Arsene Wenger's side go one point clear of Chelsea, albeit possibly for only a few hours, before the champions face a tricky away trip to Birmingham.

Arsenal head into the match on the back of two encouraging away wins at Wolves and Everton. However the defensive frailties which have haunted Wenger's team

this season have mostly occurred at home.

The Emirates has been anything but a fortress so far, with West Bromwich Albion and, most recently, Newcastle both scoring upset away wins. Another home defeat will reawaken the doubts over Arsenal's ability to stay the course.

For Spurs, however, who are three places and three points outside the Champions League reckoning, only a victory will do if they are not to risk falling further behind in the race for a top four spot.

Spurs will look to marauding left-sided midfielder Gareth Bale to provide the cutting edge against Arsenal and also have Jermain Defoe fit again after two months out with an ankle injury.

Chelsea meanwhile will take an injury depleted squad to St Andrews as they attempt to bounce back from the shock of last Sunday's 3-0 home defeat to Sunderland at Stamford Bridge.

Manager Carlo Ancelotti has just Branislav Ivanovic

and Paulo Ferreira available to play in central defence, with Alex joining John Terry on the sidelines earlier this week.

Add to that the gaping hole left by the long-term injury absence of Frank Lampard and the suspended Michael Essien, and Saturday may be Birmingham's best chance in decades of ending a 30-year winless streak against Chelsea.

In other matches this weekend, Manchester United will be expected to bag a comfortable three points against Wigan at Old Trafford after beating the Latics 5-0 home and away last season.

## FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)

### Saturday

Arsenal v Tottenham (1245 GMT), Birmingham v Chelsea, Blackpool v Wolverhampton, Bolton v Newcastle, Man Utd v Wigan, West Brom v Stoke, Liverpool v West Ham (1730 GMT)

### Sunday

Blackburn v Aston Villa (1330 GMT), Fulham v Man City (1600 GMT)

### Monday

## Japan, Korea in semis

AFP, Guangzhou

Keigi Higashi's 45th-minute goal gave Japan a 1-0 win over Thailand and a spot in the Asian Games semifinals on Friday where they were joined by fellow regional power South Korea.

The 20-year-old Higashi struck just before half-time, slotting the ball home from close range and past goal keeper Samuel Cunningham.

Japan, top scorers in the tournament with 14 goals, will now face former champions Iran, who defeated Oman 1-0, in the last four.

Thailand, coached by former England skipper Bryan Robson, created most of the pressure in the quarterfinal clash but were unable to find the finishing touch.

South Korea were forced to extra-time before seeing off 10-man Uzbekistan 3-1 in their quarterfinal and will now tackle the United Arab Emirates for a place in the gold medal match.

Hong Jeong-Ho put South Korea in front after just two minutes, but Sherzodbek Karimov pounced on a mistake by left-back Shin Kwang-Hoon in the 71st minute to equalise.

Uzbekistan played the last 30 minutes of the game with 10 men after star striker Ivan Nagaev was sent-off for a second bookable offence.

Monaco's Park Chu-Young, with his third goal of the tournament, restored his team's advantage in the second minute of extra-time with a smart twist and drive which goalkeeper Timur Juraev allowed to squeeze beneath his body.

Kim Bo-Kyung added the third in the 101st minute for an attack-minded South Korean team who peppered the target with 22 shots in the game.

The UAE defeated North Korea 9-8 in a penalty shootout after the two sides had battled to a 0-0 draw after extra-time.

Ri Chol-Myong had his penalty kick saved by Ali Housani in the UAE goal before Mohamed Al Shehhi tucked away his spotkick to send the Gulf side into the semifinals.



PHOTO: AFP

Portugal striker Helder Postiga (R) celebrates his goal with teammate Joao Moutinho during their international friendly against Spain at the Luz Stadium on Tuesday.

# Real proving unstoppable

AFP, Madrid



After a phenomenal start to his Real Madrid career, Jose Mourinho is bidding to keep his side on top of the Spanish table ahead

of the season's first 'Clasico' against Barcelona on November 29.

Real sit a point above champions Barcelona after nine wins and two draws in the league -- making Mourinho the most successful managerial debutant in Spanish league history -- and the capital giants will hope for another three points at home to Athletic Bilbao on Saturday.

Madrid have won all five of their league matches at the Santiago Bernabeu under Mourinho, who has been helped by the 12-goal haul of Portuguese sensation Cristiano Ronaldo.

"Everyone envies Mourinho, which is normal because he is the best," said

Ronaldo, who inspired Portugal to a 4-0 demolition of world champions Spain in a friendly on Wednesday.

"It is fantastic to work with him. He doesn't do anything special, he is a discipline coach and he pays attention to the details. It's amazing."

A suspension saw Mourinho watch the 1-0 win at Sporting Gijon last Sunday from the stands, and he will be expecting to see a more convincing performance against Bilbao.

Bilbao are a creditable eighth and their Spanish international striker Fernando Llorente -- a reported Real Madrid and Barcelona target -- is in fine form with eight goals.

"It is a complicated match and more so because of how Real are doing at the moment," admitted Bilbao coach Joaquin Caparros.

"However, if the team is at the same level as it has shown on many occasions and strong defensively, we will have chances."

Champions Barcelona travel to third-from-bottom Almeria on Saturday.

Barcelona of late, scoring in seven consecutive games in all competitions, and has 10 league goals to his name.

He also netted his first ever goal against Brazil as Argentina sank their arch-rivals 1-0 in a mid-week friendly in Doha.

"What else can you say about Messi?" said team-mate Andres Iniesta.

"There are no words left! Let's hope he continues like he is. This is the perfect atmosphere for him to progress even further."

Despite being just 23, Messi

is Barcelona's fourth highest league scorer in history with 98 goals in 153 appearances and his next target is third-placed Samuel Eto'o on 108 goals.

Spanish World Cup winner David Villa, a 40-million-euro summer capture from Valencia, is also beginning to find his feet with four goals in his last three league matches.

Third-placed Villarreal have fallen off the pace at the top following their 3-1 loss against Barcelona last time out and the league looks a two-horse race with less than a third of the season gone.

Villarreal, six points behind Real, have another tough test on Saturday when they host rivals Valencia, who are three points behind in fourth.

Villarreal have a flawless five wins at El Madrigal in the league and will begin as favourites against a Valencia side that have gone off the boil after a terrific start.

Fifth-placed Sevilla are level on points with Valencia and will hope to make home advantage count in Sunday's match against Real Mallorca.

## FIXTURES

### Saturday

Villarreal v Valencia (1700GMT), Almeria v Barcelona (1900GMT), Real Madrid v Athletic Bilbao (2100GMT)

### Sunday

(1600GMT unless otherwise stated): Osasuna v Sporting Gijon, Espanyol v Hercules, Levante v Racing Santander, Deportivo La Coruna v Malaga, Sevilla v Real Mallorca (1800GMT), Real Sociedad v Atletico Madrid (2000GMT)

### Monday