

Messi steals the show

Football

REUTERS, Geneva

Lionel Messi created one goal and scored another to give Argentina a 2-1 win over Portugal on Wednesday but a lively Cristiano Ronaldo also scored to steal some of the spotlight from the World Player of the Year.

The pair have been on fire in Spain's La Liga, topping the scoring table with 24 goals each, and their first encounter on the international stage lived up to its billing as an entertaining affair, with both leading their sides forward.

Argentina were without Carlos Tevez, and national football association president Julio Grondona said the Manchester City striker was missing because of an attitude problem.

"I think Tevez's absence is because of an attitude he had when he didn't come to play (against Brazil in November) and then did so for his club. The coaching staff didn't like that attitude," Grondona told Argentina's Radio Pop before the game.

Messi produced a trademark run on 14 minutes, bringing the ball in from the right wing and beating Raul Meireles to feed Di Maria in the box for the winger to open the scoring with a diagonal shot.

Portugal responded well and levelled seven minutes later when striker Hugo Almeida headed on Joao Pereira's cross and Ronaldo reacted more sharply than keeper Sergio Romero to toe-poke in the equaliser.

Both sides came close in the second half, with Portugal's Almeida wasting three fine chances and Marcos Rojo and Javier Pastore threatening for the Argentines before Messi converted a late penalty after Coentrao fouled Juan Manuel Martinez.

Ronaldo, who was a constant menace throughout his 60 minutes on the pitch, almost grabbed a second moments after scoring, leading a counter-attack and shrugging off Javier Mascherano to fire a low shot that missed the target after a deflection.

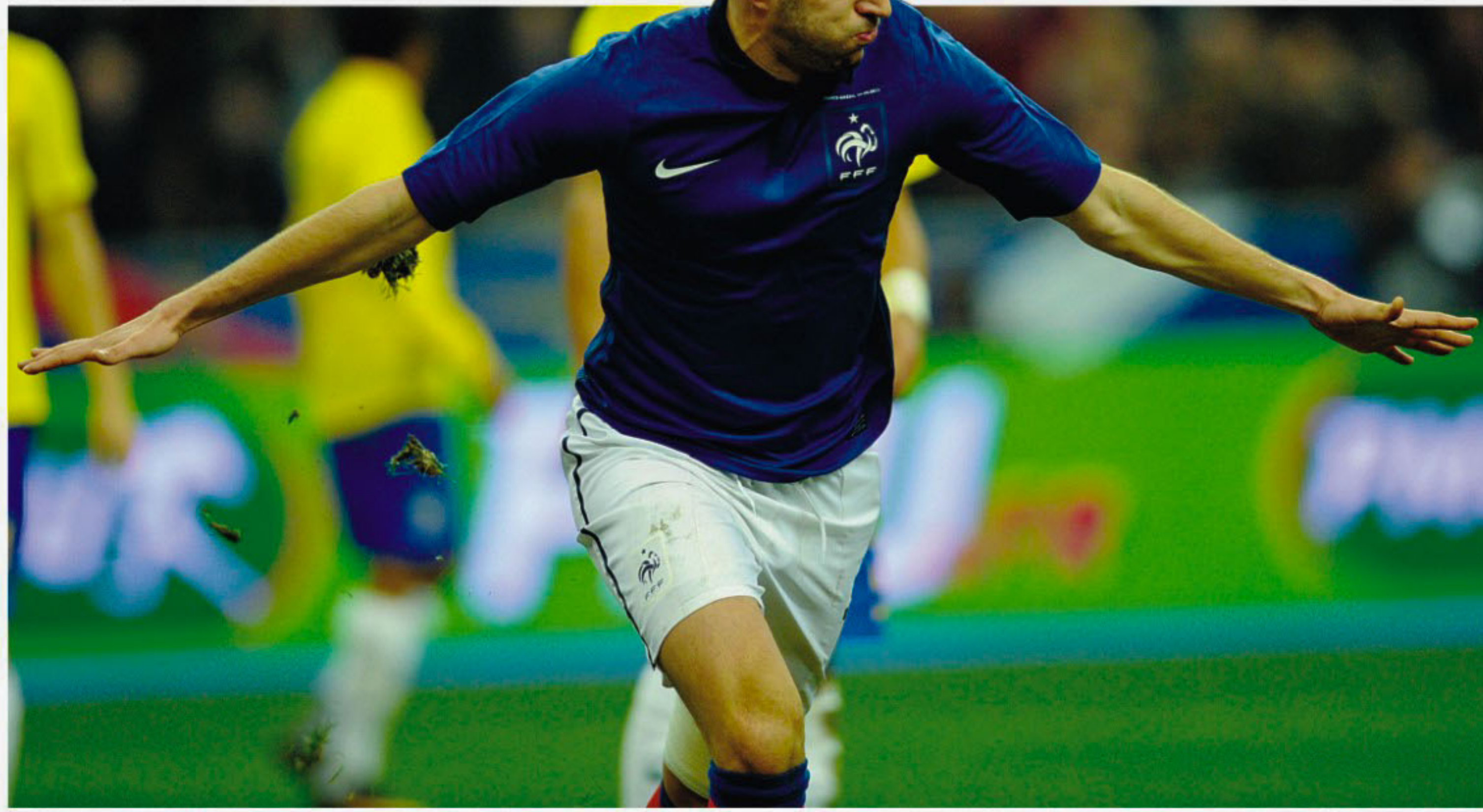
Argentina composed themselves and came close to taking the lead again in the 39th minute when left back Marcos Rojo pushed forward to produce a fine cross which Ezequiel Lavezzi wasted by sending his half-volley over Eduardo's bar.

Portugal's strong spell after half time should have put them ahead but Almeida sent one header over, another against the bar and then somehow sent an easy tap-in wide.



Argentina superstar Lionel Messi (L) dribbles past Portugal midfielder Joao Moutinho during their international friendly at the La Praille Stadium in Geneva on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP



France striker Karim Benzema celebrates his all-important goal against Brazil during their international friendly at the Stade de France on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

France edge Brazil

Football

AFP, Paris

England overcame a stuttering start to edge out Denmark 2-1 in Copenhagen on Wednesday with Aston Villa pair Darren Bent and Ashley Young cancelling out an early effort from Liverpool's Daniel Agger.

Young scored his first goal for his country to give Fabio Capello's men a fillip ahead of their Euro 2012 qualifier against Wales next month.

In another of a whole raft of friendlies across Europe France thanked a second half goal from Real Madrid forward Karim Benzema as Laurent Blanc's men saw off Brazil 1-0 at the Stade de France in the two countries' first meeting since the 1998 World Cup final at the same Stade de France venue which the French won 3-0.

Brazil put themselves under pressure after midfielder Hernanes was red-carded five minutes before the break for placing his studs in Benzema's chest.

Elsewhere, Germany failed to break their 15-year winless run against Italy as visiting

striker Giuseppe Rossi came off the bench to score a late equaliser and seal a 1-1 draw in Dortmund, cancelling out Miroslav Klose's first-half goal for Joachim Loew's side.

The Bayern Munich forward's strike was his 59th on his 106th appearance as he draws closer to Gerd Mueller's all-time Germany record of 68 goals.

World champions Spain had to wait until four minutes from the end of their match with Colombia at the Bernabeu for David Silva to net the only goal while the team they beat in last year's World Cup final, Holland, overcame Austria 3-1 in Eindhoven with Wesley Sneijder, Klaas-Jan Huntelaar and Dirk Kuyt from the penalty spot hitting the goals.

The win was achieved without several regulars, including Nigel de Jong, Rafael van der Vaart, Robin van Persie and Arjen Robben.

Argentina saw off Portugal 2-1 in Geneva with Lionel Messi netting a late penalty winner after Cristiano Ronaldo had looked like saving a draw for the Portuguese. Ronaldo's clubmate Angel Di Maria had netted the Argentine opener.

RESULTS

Spain 1 (Silva 86) Colombia 0
Turkey 0 South Korea 0
Croatia 4 (Da Silva 10, Kalinic 13, 61, Ilicic 75) Czech Republic 2
(Sivok 20, Rosicky 45+1)
Russia 0 Iran 1 (Khalatbari 90)
Macedonia 0 Cameroon 1
(Matthew Mbuta 75)
Denmark 1 (Agger 8) England 2
(Bent 10, Young 68)
Holland 3 (Sneijder 28, Huntelaar 48, Kuyt 71-pen) Austria 1
(Armutovic 84-pen)
Germany 1 (Klose 16) Italy 1 (Rossi 81)
France 1 (Benzema 55) Brazil 0
Portugal 1 (Ronaldo 21) Argentina 2

Obi shines in win

Football

AFP, Lagos

New Nigeria coach Samson Siasia watched Inter Milan debutant Joel Obi shine in Wednesday's 2-1 friendly win over Sierra Leone.

Uncapped Obi, 19, was taking the place of injured Heartland of Owerri midfielder Ikechukwu Ibenegbu.

Siasia's Super Eagles opened the scoring on 15 minutes through a penalty converted by Taye Taiwo, before substitute Ekigho Ehiosun doubled the advantage in first half stoppage time.

Sierra Leone deservedly pulled a goal

back a minute from full time through the dangerous Mohammed Bangoura, who troubled the Nigerian back line all night long in an exciting match at the Teslim Balogun Stadium in Lagos.

Nigeria had a goal disallowed in the second half after Osaze Odemirigie's header off a cross by Ahmed Musa was ruled offside.

This was the first official match for Siasia, who will take some positives from this encounter, with Obi a revelation on his debut.

The Inter Milan player looked very much at home in his first match for Nigeria and provided an assist for the second goal when his cross from the left was finished off masterfully by Ehiosun.

Materazzi's dig at Zizou

AFP, Rome

World Cup winner Marco Materazzi claimed on Wednesday that France legend Zinedine Zidane needs to ask himself for forgiveness before he could apologise to the Italian, whom he famously head butted during the 2006 World Cup final.

The headbutt earned Zidane a red card and Italy went on to win the trophy on penalties.

The former Bordeaux, Juventus and Real Madrid star has ever since steadfastly refused to apologise publicly to Materazzi for the head-butt, which proved the final act in an otherwise glorious career.

He reiterated his position this week, but Materazzi claims the Frenchman of Algerian origin first needs to do some soul searching.

"I think more than anything else Zidane needs to ask himself for forgiveness because it's his career not mine," he said.

"When there is conflict there is clarification, it's better to say things face to face.

"However, during my career I've had problems with few people, you could count them on one hand, that's to my credit and also that of others."

Silva saves blushes

Football

AFP, Madrid

David Silva scored just four minutes from full time on Wednesday to earn Spain a hard-fought 1-0 victory over Colombia and end the world champions' embarrassing streak of winless friendlies.

The Manchester City striker picked up a pass from Jesus Navas to slot the ball past David Ospina in the Colombian goal.

Before that, it was Colombia, ranked 50 places below the top-rated Spain in the FIFA rankings, which had many of the best chances in the match at Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

In the 13th minute, Abel Aguilar only had Iker Casillas to beat after dodging Xavi Hernandez, but the Spanish keeper blocked the shot.

Two minutes later, David Villa hit post at close range after latching onto a through pass from Andres Iniesta. The Barcelona striker caught the rebound but then sent the ball across the front of the goalmouth.

Left back Pablo Armero, Juan Cuadrado, who had come on for Adrian Ramos early in the second half, and Wigan striker Hugo Rodallega all had chances for the South Americans.

But it was Silva who saved Spain's blushes in the end. "Jesus Navas gave me a good ball from the right and I was able to go and score," he told Spanish public television.

Spain has lost two friendlies since it won the World Cup in South Africa in July, going down 4-1 to Argentina and an even more humiliating 4-0 to Portugal, as well drawing 1-1 with Mexico.

But it tops its Euro 2012 qualification Group I with a 100 percent record.

Coach Vicente del Bosque described it as "a very intense match."

"Colombia was very well organised, they did not let us play as we would like... But we can't complain, the (Spanish) players put in a lot of effort. We must give credit to our opponents."

He also said the match was "good preparation" for the Euro 2012 qualifying games against the Czech Republic and Lithuania in March.

His Colombian counterpart, Hernan Dario Gomez, said his team "had to be very organised... And sometimes it worked," but adding "it is tiring to play football when you don't have the ball."

Customs destroy WC shirt

AFP, Grenoble

A football memorabilia collector was left fuming and out of pocket after customs officials destroyed a package containing his prize possession - French star David Trezeguet's shirt from the 1998 World Cup final win over Brazil.

Customs destroyed the item on suspicion that the shirt was a forgery, to the horror of its owner, who had paid some 7,000 euros (9,600 dollars) for the garment put up for sale by a Brazilian on an internet site.

When the French fan, who had exchanged two of his own shirts worth some 4,000 euros as part payment for Trezeguet's, turned up at the post office to collect his package officials told him that customs had destroyed it in the belief it was a counterfeit.

"I was livid - that was to be the star piece of my collection," the man told regional paper Le Dauphine Libere.

But regional customs official Jean-Paul Balzamo told AFP: "A shirt of such value should have been the object of a customs declaration but this was not the case."

'Our best performance'

Football

AFP, Dortmund

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli described Wednesday's 1-1 draw with Germany as the Azzurri's best performance since he took charge last August.

"It was a very good game from my team," said the 53-year-old Prandelli, who took over from Marcello Lippi as coach after Italy's first-round exit from last year's World Cup.

"That was the best performance since I took charge.

"We played against one of the best teams in the world and did well.

"We tried from the outset to put them under pressure and to score an early goal.

"We are still not on the same level as the German eleven, but we are reducing the distance between the two sides."

The last time Germany beat Italy was a 2-0 win in Zurich in June 1995, with the Azzurri winning all four games between the two sides since.

This latest encounter finished all square after Italy's 24-year-old Giuseppe Rossi cancelled out Miroslav Klose's first-half goal.

The home side have a poor record in matches between the two nations with Italy enjoying 14 wins compared to Germany's seven victories with now nine games drawn.

Having set out to beat Italy for the first time in nearly 16 years, Germany controlled the game for long periods, but failed to score

the second goal which would have sealed victory.

Bayern Munich's Klose scored his 59th goal on his 106th appearance to draw closer to Gerd Mueller's all-time Germany record of 68 goals.

He put the hosts ahead after only 16 minutes following some superb play by Real Madrid's Mesut Ozil and Bayern's Thomas Mueller as Germany continued their World Cup form having reached the semi-finals in South Africa.

"That was an entertaining international from both teams," said Germany coach Joachim Loew.

"We could not maintain the tempo over the 90 minutes, as we had planned.

"In the second-half, we missed chances to make it 2-0.

"We can improve our reactions, but the goal was top-class, it came from a really good attack."

Germany hosted Italy at Dortmund's same Signal Iduna Park stadium where the Italians knocked the hosts out of the 2006 World Cup on their way to winning the title, but there was to be no pay-back for the home side.

"It was a pity that we couldn't get another goal," said Germany's vice-captain Bastian Schweinsteiger.

"It was very difficult on the pitch, we are a team who try and dominate the game through our technical ability.

"It didn't work out, but I trust in the fact that we will be able to beat Italy once again in the future."



Italy striker Giuseppe Rossi (2nd from R) celebrates his equalising goal with teammates during their international friendly in Dortmund on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League

Muktijoddha v Ctg Abahani

Time: 4:00pm

Venue: Bishreshtha Mostafa Kamal