

Octopus roots for Real

AFP, Benalmadena



An octopus named Iker, which correctly predicted the result of the last two "classicos" between Real Madrid and Barcelona, has foreseen Real will reach the final of the Champions League.

Iker predicted Real would reach the final at London's Wembley arena on May 28 by choosing to eat a sardine from a glass cylinder decorated with the club's badge instead of one from a cylinder with Barcelona's badge on Tuesday at the Sea Life Aquarium in the southern city of Benalmadena.

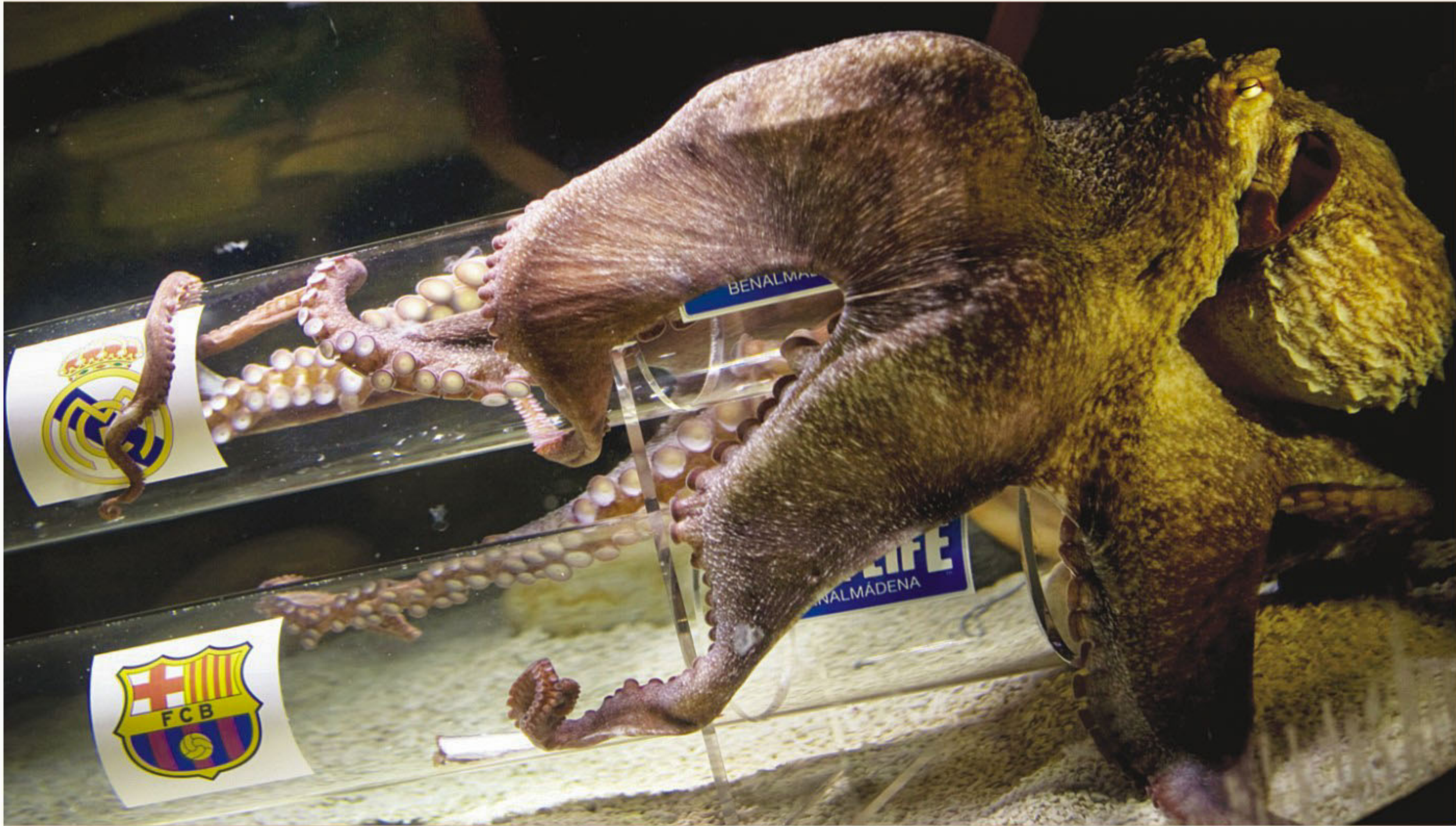
The 16-kilo (35-pound) octopus, named after Real keeper Iker Casillas, has already predicted Real's 1-1 draw against Barcelona in La Liga on April 16 and the club's 1-0 win over the Catalan club in the King's Cup final four days later.

The two sides will face each other in the first leg of the Champions League semifinal at Real's Bernabeu stadium on Wednesday. The second leg will take place at Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium on May 3.

Whichever Spanish team makes it to the final will face either Manchester United or Schalke 04.

During the World Cup in South Africa last year, Paul, an octopus in the German town of Oberhausen, became world famous after correctly predicting all the results involving the German team, as well as that of the final, won by Spain.

Paul died on October 26, 2010.



WILL THE CURSE OF THE SOOTHSAYER STRIKE BARCELONA? Octopus Iker eats a sardine from a box decorated with the crest of Real Madrid at the Sea Life Aquarium in Benalmadena yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Dzeko breaks duck

AFP, Blackburn



Edin Dzeko's first Premier League goal earned Manchester City a 1-0 win over Blackburn on Monday which strengthened his team's hopes of qualifying for the Champions League.

City were heading for a disappointing draw against their relegation-threatened hosts when substitute Dzeko, who had only been on the pitch three minutes, finished well after the Rovers defence failed to clear a dangerous ball by David Silva in the 75th minute.

It sent City four points clear of fifth-placed Tottenham in the race for the Champions League and increased Blackburn's relegation worries.

Rovers will feel hard done by but they have now won just three times in 17 league attempts under manager Steve Kean.

This was hardly a vintage City performance but Roberto Mancini's side are now clear favourites to clinch the fourth and final Champions League spot.

They could even overtake fast-fading Arsenal, who currently lie third, after moving to within five points of Arsene Wenger's side with a game in hand.

Since their previous appearance on the Premier League stage, a miserable 3-0 defeat at Liverpool, City have closed in on their first piece of major silverware for 35 years by

reaching the FA Cup final.

And Mancini kept faith with the team that overcame neighbours Manchester United in the semifinal as City looked to end a three-match losing run on the road in the league. Blackburn, who started just above the relegation zone, desperately needed a win after taking just four points out of a possible 27.

Yet they almost found themselves behind as early as the third minute when Spanish international Silva let fly with a sweetly-struck left-foot volley which crashed against the post with keeper Paul Robinson beaten.

Robinson was almost embarrassed by Aleksandar Kolarov in the 10th minute, the Serbian full-back's speculative 35-yard effort dipping narrowly wide of the target.

With their 10-season stay in the top-tier in jeopardy, Blackburn, who recalled former City striker Benjani Mwaruware to the side, needed to seize the initiative.

But despite claims for a penalty after Vincent Kompany's challenge on Jason Roberts, they lacked the cutting edge to seriously trouble City keeper Joe Hart.

His biggest test in a first half of few chances came from David Dunn's 31st minute free-kick which posed few problems for the England keeper.

However, City survived a major 41st minute scare when Blackburn defender Chris Samba out jumped both Kolarov and Gareth Barry to connect with Michel Salgado's cross to power a header just wide.

Another Clasico duel

AFP, Madrid



With the Kings Cup final loss fresh in their minds, Barcelona are out for revenge when they face bitter rivals Real Madrid in Wednesday's eagerly-anticipated Champions League semifinal first leg at the Santiago Bernabeu.

It is the third meeting between the two Spanish powerhouses in just 12 days and Barcelona hope to continue their impressive recent record at the Bernabeu as they look to bounce back from the 1-0 Kings Cup extra-time final defeat to Real five days ago.

It was Jose Mourinho's first trophy as Madrid manager and now the Portuguese coach has his eye on delivering a 10th European Cup to Madrid as he bids to become the first coach to win the Champions League with three different clubs.

Mourinho was humiliated 5-0 by Barcelona in the league back in November, but Real are now on the up with a 1-1 league home draw against Barca followed by the Cup win.

"We can take them on over two games; we have just done that," said Mourinho. "There is no reason we can't beat them in the Champions League because we have just drawn once against them and then beaten them."

History is on Madrid's side with Real getting the better of Barcelona in their two previous semifinal meetings in the 1960 European Cup

and most recently the last four of the 2002 Champions League with Madrid going on to be crowned champions on both occasions.

Barcelona have reached the Champions League semifinals for four successive seasons and coach Pep Guardiola will hope to fare better than last season when he was outfoxed by Mourinho's Inter Milan side at this stage.

Barcelona defeated Osasuna 2-0 on Saturday to maintain their eight-point gap over Real and stay on course for their third consecutive La Liga title.

HEAD-TO-HEAD

01/05/02 SF Real Madrid - Barcelona 1-1
23/04/02 SF Barcelona - Real Madrid 0-2
23/11/06 R1 Barcelona - Real Madrid 2-1
09/11/06 R1 Real Madrid - Barcelona 2-2
27/04/06 SF Barcelona - Real Madrid 1-3
21/04/06 SF Real Madrid - Barcelona 3-1

But Guardiola admitted his side were feeling the effects of a long season.

"We won't be going to Madrid in the best physical shape, but we'll go there with a lot of enthusiasm and we have a lot of belief in ourselves," said Guardiola.

"We accept that Madrid may be favourites, but we will go to the Bernabeu to attack, score goals and try to win the game."

Lionel Messi notched his 50th goal of the season in the Osasuna win and has scored on each of

his last three visits to the Bernabeu with Barcelona boasting two wins and a draw from their last three trips to the capital.

The form of Messi and David Villa's goal at the weekend, ending an 11-game drought in all competitions, is a boon for Barca but an injury to Brazilian Adriano is their latest defensive concern.

Full back Adriano could miss the rest of the season with a thigh injury so Guardiola is stretched at the back with captain Carles Puyol struggling with muscular problems and Frenchman Eric Abidal recovering from surgery on a liver tumour.

Real are having more luck with Argentine forward Gonzalo Higuain and Brazilian playmaker Kaka back to their best after long lay-offs.

Higuain scored a hat-trick and Kaka grabbed a brace in Real's 6-3 win at Valencia on Saturday to throw their hats into the ring for a starting place

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PROBABLE TEAMS

REAL MADRID

Iker Casillas, Sergio Ramos, Raul Albiol, Alvaro Arbeloa, Marcelo, Lass Diarra, Xabi Alonso, Pepe, Mesut Ozil, Cristiano Ronaldo, Angel di Maria

BARCELONA

Victor Valdes, Gerard Pique, Carles Puyol (or Maxwell), Dani Alves, Javier Mascherano, Sergi Busquets, Xavi Hernandez, Andres Iniesta, David Villa, Lionel Messi, Pedro Rodriguez

Iniesta dreams of Wembley

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona midfielder Andres Iniesta is already dreaming of a Champions League final tussle at Wembley even as his side prepared for their semifinal against old rivals Real Madrid.

"I am dreaming of going out there at Wembley. We must think only of going over (to Madrid for Wednesday's first leg) and scoring some goals and then in the return our fans will drive us on to Wembley," Iniesta told a news conference.

"It would be the cherry on the cake to land another two titles," said Iniesta, in reference to a league title as good as retained and a potential Champions League success to follow on from previous triumphs in 1992, 2006 and 2009.

"We have to fight to the finish," he stressed, in the knowledge that Real are desperate for a 10th European crown having just given coach Jose Mourinho his first Spanish silverware in the shape of last week's King's Cup win over the Catalan club.

Barca, with their honed high-speed passing game, would normally be rated as favourites as Mourinho tries to mould Real in what is his first season with the club.

If they do come through they will face either 2009 final victims Manchester United or Germany's Schalke on May 28.



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester City forward Edin Dzeko celebrates his all-important goal against Blackburn Rovers during their Premier League encounter at Ewood Park on Sunday.

Milan need 4 more pts

AFP, Rome

AC Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri said Monday he is simply focussing on earning the four points necessary to deliver an 18th league title to the club.

Milan head Serie A by eight points with four games left and due to their better head-to-head record against second place city rivals Inter Milan, they need only four more points to be crowned champions.

They could even win the title this weekend if they beat Bologna at home on Sunday and the reigning champions fail to win away to Cesena the day before.

"Maybe Sunday won't be enough but we should be thinking only of getting these four points and winning the title," Allegri told Sky.

Milan are heading towards a possible double as they are also in the Italian Cup semifinals, although last week they drew their home leg against Palermo 2-2.

The one blot on Allegri's record this season was Milan's early exit from the Champions League.

Having been beaten into second place in their group by a vastly superior Real Madrid, they were knocked out in the last 16 by Tottenham.

"We did everything possible," he said. "Of course we could have beaten Tottenham. We didn't manage to but there's nothing to reproach us about."

Football salaries revealed

SPORTS DESK

Portuguese website Football Finance has published a list of the 100 highest paid players in world football in terms of salary alone.

Most of the top ten comes as little surprise, but there are a host of players in the top 100 who might raise eyebrows. Glen Johnson, for example, is the 24th highest paid player in the world while Fredi Kanoute and Kevin Kuranyi come in at 34 and 37 respectively.

Also surprising is the low standing of certain other stars. Inter Milan's Wesley Sneijder, last season's Champions League winner, only comes in at number 86 while Xabi Alonso is at 71 and Carles Puyol on 48.

Only four players in the top hundred do not play in Europe. Ronaldinho, David Beckham, Deco and Thierry Henry, are the four whose stock has soared beyond football's European heartland.

TOP 20

(LIST IS ORDERED BY NAME/TEAM/MONTHLY SALARY/ANNUAL SALARY)

1. Cristiano Ronaldo Real Madrid €1,000,000 €12,000,000
2. Lionel Messi FC Barcelona €875,000 €10,500,000
3. Fernando Torres Chelsea €833,000 €10,000,000
4. Yaya Toure Manchester City €833,000 €10,000,000
5. Wayne Rooney Manchester United €791,000 €9,500,000
6. Ricardo Kaka Real Madrid €833,000 €9,000,000
7. Zlatan Ibrahimovic AC Milan €833,000 €9,000,000
8. Emmanuel Adebayor Real Madrid €708,000 €8,500,000
9. Carlos Tevez Manchester City €666,000 €8,000,000
10. Samuel Eto'o Internazionale €666,000 €8,000,000
11. Frank Ribery Bayern Munich €666,000 €8,000,000
12. John Terry Chelsea €625,000 €7,500,000
13. Frank Lampard Chelsea €625,000 €7,500,000
14. Steven Gerrard Liverpool €625,000 €7,500,000
15. Xavi FC Barcelona €625,000 €7,500,000
16. Anders Iniesta FC Barcelona €583,000 €7,000,000
17. David Villa FC Barcelona €583,000 €7,000,000
18. Daniel Alves FC Barcelona €583,000 €7,000,000
19. Edin Dzeko Manchester City €541,000 €6,500,000
20. Rio Ferdinand Manchester United €541,000 €6,500,000

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Who do you think will be cricket's next chief selector?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

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www.twitter.com/dssport



Bangladesh A v South Africa A

Fourth ODI (D/N)

Venue: Kimberley

Bangladesh League

Abahani v Sk Jamal Dhanmondi Club

Time: 5:00pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium



SET Max

Indian Premier League

Pune v Chennai

Live from 4:30pm

Kochi v Deccan

Live from 8:30pm

TEN Sports

Champions League

SEMIFINAL, FIRST LEG

Real Madrid v Barcelona

Live from 12:45am (Thursday)

ESPN

Sportscentre India

Sports News

Live at 8:30pm

English Premiership

Fulham v Bolton

Live from 1:00am (Thursday)