



A MESSI MAGIC MOMENT: Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi is ecstatic after scoring one of his two sensational goals during their Champions League semifinal against arch-rivals Real Madrid at Bernabeu on Wednesday.

REUTERS, Madrid



Lionel Messi's sublime double lifted Barcelona to a 2-0 win over bitter rivals Real Madrid and lit up an acrimonious Champions League semifinal first leg in which the hosts finished with 10 men and had coach Jose Mourinho sent off.

The Argentine World Player of the Year's clinical finish from close range in the 76th minute and brilliant individual strike three minutes from time gave Barca the spoils at a rowdy Bernabeu on Wednesday in an attritional contest which was short on entertaining football but rich in controversy.

Bad blood had flowed between the sides in the lead-up to the match, their third meeting in just over a week, and it spilled on to the pitch as the players trooped off at the break.

Barca reserve goalkeeper Jose Manuel Pinto was shown a red card following a fracas next to the tunnel, while Real defender Pepe was dismissed for a lunging tackle on Daniel Alves with just over half an hour left.

Mourinho, who unleashed a sustained rant at his press conference in which he accused UEFA of favouring Barca, was sent to the stands for protesting the decision.

Messi's goals, his 10th and 11th in 11 games in this edition of Europe's elite club competition, gave Barca a huge advantage to take back to the Nou Camp next week.

The 23-year-old sped into the penalty area to meet Ibrahim Afellay's low cross from the right and steer the ball past Iker Casillas from close range to break the deadlock.

He followed that up with a wonderful second when he weaved his way through the Real defence and slotted past Casillas to give the Catalan side a two-goal cushion to take into Tuesday's return leg in the Catalan capital.

Real tore into Barca and stopped them playing in the first half of last week's King's Cup final, which the Madrid club won 1-0, but it was a different story on Wednesday as Barca controlled without showing too much ambition in attack.

David Villa cut in from the right wing in the 11th minute and sent a low drive whistling past the post and Messi sent Xavi clear in the 25th but his effort was straight at Casillas.

The home side's best effort of the first half came moments before the break when Cristiano Ronaldo tested Victor Valdes with a swerving effort the Barca keeper just managed to block.

The second half was short on the kind of entertaining football Real and Barca typically produce as the visitors again dominated possession without ever really threatening the home goal until Messi took matters into his own hands.

PHOTO:
AFP

Mourinho furious at Pepe red card

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona may make a formal complaint to UEFA over accusations by Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho that referees always favour Barca after his club lost 2-0 in the Champions League semifinal first leg.

A late brace from Lionel Messi on Wednesday helped the Catalan giants put one leg in the Wembley final but there were sour grapes as Mourinho, who was sent to the stands at the Bernabeu stadium, vented his fury at the straight red card for Portuguese centre-back Pepe.

"In the post match press conference, Jose Mourinho severely criticised the referee Herr (Wolfgang) Stark and insinuated that UEFA treated Barca favourably," the club said in a statement on Thursday.

"The club's legal department is now

studying whether to take his remarks to the UEFA disciplinary commission."

UEFA said it is waiting for report from the referee and its representatives at the match.

"What will the charges be? Will the comments of Jose Mourinho be included or not? We probably won't know any more until this (Thursday) afternoon," a UEFA spokesman told AFP.

Mourinho charged Pepe's red card, for a tackle on Dani Alves, was another example of favouritism for Barca.

"Chelsea couldn't get to the final three years ago (in the 2009 semifinal) against Barcelona," said the Portuguese coach, who by that stage had left the London club for Inter Milan.

"Against Inter Milan last year we played with ten men against Barcelona (Inter still went on to eliminate them and win the trophy beating Bayern Munich) and once again this year we played with ten men," bemoaned Mourinho.

"I don't know if Barcelona are friendly or not. They are a great team so congratulations to them but they have this power. Pepe sent off and me too. I don't know why."

"Why? Why does a fantastic team need this? (Anders) Frisk (the referee for the 2009 semifinal between Barcelona and Chelsea), Stark. Why? Why? Football is equal for everyone. The team that deserves to win should win."

"If they won by merit we would accept it. Why in a balanced game like tonight did it happen? Why? Why did they leave us with ten men? Why did they turn down four penalties against Chelsea in the semi-final a few years ago? I hope one day I will have an answer. I always try to be honest. I just want to know why."

"I don't know if it's the UNICEF (Barca's sponsor) publicity or the friendship of (Spanish football federation chief Angel) Villar at UEFA, where he is vice president, I don't know if it's because they are so nice, but they have got great power. The rest of us have no chance."

Asked on his team's chances of overturning the result in the second leg at Camp Nou on May 3 Mourinho replied: "Obviously it is a difficult mission in Barcelona. Yes, I think we are eliminated. We will go with everything to get a result for our fans but I can't see it."

Asked if he liked the kind of football Madrid had played in the turbulent 2-0 defeat in the Champions League semifinal first leg, the £80m winger said: "No, I don't like it but I have to adapt to what is asked of me." He added: "This is the way it is. We have a strategy."

Guardiola was asked about Mourinho's comments in his press conference and simply replied: "I don't want to say anything about that. No comment."

"We are one step away from the final but we are not at Wembley yet and a club with nine European Cups (Real Madrid) never gives up."

C'Ron not happy

THE GUARDIAN



Cristiano Ronaldo has revealed he was unhappy with Jose Mourinho's defensive tactics against Barcelona, while implying that Real Madrid would have settled for a 0-0 draw at the Bernabeu.

Asked if he liked the kind of football Madrid had played in the turbulent 2-0 defeat in the Champions League semifinal first leg, the £80m winger said: "No, I don't like it but I have to adapt to what is asked of me." He added: "This is the way it is. We have a strategy."

Ronaldo cut a picture of frustration. Having initially been asked to play as a lone striker he was seen imploring his reluctant team-mates to get forward and support him. When he was then switched to the right to take on Carles Puyol, who was being played out of position at left-back, he found himself starved of the ball as Mourinho's side pursued their policy of containment.

"Being honest, it is true that we did not

have a shot on target when it was 11 against 11 but 0-0 is not a bad result at home. We could have gone to Camp Nou and scored. We didn't play well but the game was under control."

Before the match the talk was of a head-to-head with Leo Messi over who could lay claim to being the world's greatest player but in the event the Portuguese winger found himself overshadowed.

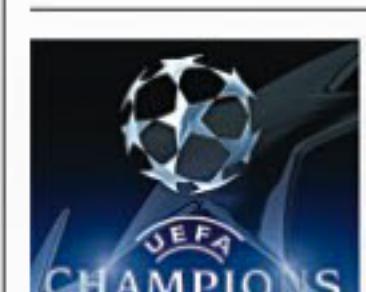
"Messi?" he replied, when asked about the Argentinian's two goals. "It's easier against 10 men. I would like to play against 10 men too, like he does. It is no excuse but they always play against ten men."

"I don't understand why this always happens. I couldn't talk to the referee because if I had I would have got a card for sure. The ref sent off Pepe: what more can I say? Every year is the same."

"I feel bad for us and for Mourinho because it always happens to him. Barcelona are a great team but these guys have a lot of power off the pitch too. Chelsea, Inter, Arsenal. It's always the same. Is that a coincidence?"

Catalunya celebrates; Madrid moans

AFP, Madrid



Spain's sports media was divided Thursday following Barcelona's 2-0 first leg Champions League win over a 10-man Real Madrid, with some papers questioning the referee's decision to send off Pepe.

"Why?" screamed both sports daily Marca and AS on their front pages.

"An exaggerated red card against Pepe left Madrid with 10 men against Barca for the fourth time," added Marca on its front page.

German referee Wolfgang Stark issued Real's Portuguese centre-back Pepe with a straight red card on the hour mark following a tackle on Dani Alves.

Barcelona made the extra man count with Messi converting an Ibrahim Afellay cross on 76 minutes and then scored a mesmerising goal on 86 minutes for his 11th Champions League goal of the season.

"Ecstasy," wrote Barcelona-based sports daily Mundo Deportivo in bold letters on its front page below a photo of Messi celebrating one of his goals.

"Messi is the damn mas-

ter," it added, in a reference to Barcelona coach Josep Guardiola's comments before the match that Real coach Jose Mourinho was "the damn boss, the damn master".

"The damn master is Messi," said rival Catalan sports daily Sport on its front page.

"Mourinho, who was sent off, is a bad loser. He once again presented himself as a victim of the referees," it added.

During his post-match press conference Mourinho said referees have always favoured Barcelona and highlighted the dismissal of Pepe as an example.

"It shouldn't have been a red card for Pepe. Maybe someone can give me an answer. A foul on a Barcelona player and miraculously a red card," he said.

Marca agreed with it.

It said the referee "became the big protagonist of the match by sending off Pepe at the start of the second half. A severe decision after an error on the part of the player against Dani Alves, which no one thought would lead to more than a yellow card."

However, the 27-year-old - who has not earned a recall to the national side - had to go off in the ninth minute of the match.

Lyon coach Claude Puel -

who has switched Toulalan to a central defensive role this season - said that the 36-times capped Toulalan could have suffered ligament damage.

Toulalan injures his knee

AFP, Lyon

Lyon's former France midfielder Jeremy Toulalan looks set to miss their next league match against Toulouse on Sunday after suffering a left knee injury in Wednesday's 3-2 win over Montpellier.

The 27-year-old - who has not earned a recall to the national side - had to go off in the ninth minute of the match.

Lyon coach Claude Puel -



WAYNE ROONEY

'I made a mistake'

AFP, London

Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney has admitted he was wrong to seek a transfer earlier this season after questioning whether the club was good enough to challenge for top honours.

Rooney stunned Old Trafford in October by agitating for a transfer, accusing the Premier League leaders of failing to match his ambitions and lacking the muscle to attract top signings.

But Rooney, who has played a key role in putting United within touching distance of their third Champions League final in four years as well as a record 19th title, has now conceded his criticisms of the club were wide of the mark.

"I made a mistake," Rooney told the Guardian.

"You know, when I look back at it now, I'll say it again, how wrong was I? I'm willing to admit that. I've apologised and ever since then I have wanted to try to prove myself again to the fans. I feel I am doing that now."

Rooney eventually agreed a lucrative new deal at United but initially struggled to win back the support of fans after a prolonged slump in form.

However, the 25-year-old won a standing ovation from United's travelling fans during Tuesday's 2-0 Champions League semifinal first leg victory over Schalke 04.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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Rajasthan v Mumbai

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ESPN

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Sports News

Live at 8:30pm

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League

Ctg Mohammadan v Feni Soccer Club

Time: 4:00pm

Venue: Cox's Bazar Stadium

Farashganj v Sk Russel

Time: 5:00pm

Venue: Bangabandhu

National Stadium

Bangladesh A v South Africa A

Fifth ODI (D/N)

Venue: Benoni