

Messi is world's best: Neymar

 Football

REUTERS

Neymar has distanced himself from remarks made by Brazilian great Pele claiming the Santos striker is better than Barcelona's Argentine forward Lionel Messi.

A day after arriving in Japan for the Club World Cup, the 19-year-old Brazil striker quickly sought to defuse any friction between Santos and tournament favourites Barca.

"I haven't come here to prove anything to anyone," Neymar, who with his spiky mohican and ear piercings could not look more different than the clean-cut Messi.

"I've always said Messi is the best player in the world," added Neymar, who has calmed down this year following run-ins with team mates and an infamous Twitter rant telling a referee he would "leave in a coffin."

"Stopping (Messi) playing is very difficult but we're looking at ways to slow him down," Neymar told reporters in Nagoya on Friday.

Neymar was strongly linked with several European clubs including Barca and Real Madrid before agreeing to stay at Santos until 2014 after helping them win the Libertadores Cup in June.

Santos were last crowned kings of South American almost 50 years ago when Pele inspired them to the title in 1962 and 1963 with Neymar instrumental in bringing back the glory days.

"Pele was a legend -- one of a kind," said

Neymar, having also been compared to the three-times World Cup winner by Pele himself. "I'll never be like him."

Barring the almost unthinkable, Santos will face Barcelona in a mouth-watering Club World Cup final in Yokohama on December 18.

Santos must beat either Mexico's Monterrey or J-League champions Kashiwa Reysol in their semifinal before Barca face Qatar's Al Sadd or Esperance of Tunisia.

Messi and Neymar looking to outshine each other in front of 70,000 people in Yokohama would provide an electrifying sub-plot to the game.

"It's been a long time since we won the Libertadores Cup," Neymar told reporters. "But we've been working towards the Club World Cup from the second half of our season."

In contrast, Barcelona fly out to the Far East after a potentially rough-and-tumble 'Clasico' showdown away to bitter rivals Real Madrid at the weekend.

Santos will be fresher and have had more time to adjust to criss-crossing of so many time zones, although the absence through injury of defensive midfielder Adriano is a big loss.

Neymar acknowledged Adriano would be "sorely missed" but showed no lack of confidence about the team's chances of lifting the trophy.

"I don't have a special approach to the game," said the Brazilian league's Player of the Year.



Brazilian club Santos's goalkeeper Vladimir dives full length to block the ball during a training session at the Mizuho Athletics Stadium in Nagoya yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Centre-stage Bernabeu

AFP, Madrid



record at the Bernabeu.

It is now three years since Real last won the league and while they carry a three-point lead over their Catalan rivals with a game in hand, they know that the Clasicos can play a key role in the destination of the championship.

While Barca have stuttered away from home this season, Real have been relentless and will be now looking for their 16th consecutive victory in all competitions, while in the league they have scored 49 goals in 14 games.

Still, the statistics go out of the window when the visitors are the domestic and European champions and have already beaten Real this season in the

Spanish Super Cup.

Barcelona have generally come out on top in direct clashes between the arch rivals since the arrival of Guardiola as coach in 2008, with the notable defeat coming in the Copa del Rey final last season.

FIXTURES	
Saturday	
Levante v Sevilla (1700GMT), Real Betis v Valencia (1900GMT), Real Madrid v Barcelona (2100GMT)	
Sunday	
(1500GMT unless otherwise stated):	
Rayo Vallecano v Sporting Gijon (1100GMT), Getafe v Granada, Villarreal v Real Sociedad, Real Zaragoza v Real Mallorca (1700GMT), Malaga v Osasuna (1700GMT), Athletic Bilbao v Racing Santander (1845GMT), +Espanyol v	

Guardiola has registered two wins and a draw at the Bernabeu when the two teams have met in the league, while including matches at Camp Nou, Barca have had five wins and a draw.

Along with this, Barcelona also knocked Real out of the Champions League in the semifinals last spring.

Barca midfielder Xavi has tried to play down the importance of the game, however, by claiming that it will not be decisive in who wins the title.

"Madrid look the most dangerous that they have been over the last three or four years but nothing will be definite after the game," he said.

"These matches are not directly related to the final positioning in the table but it would be an important step for us if we could beat them there.

"I would like it to be an open game, where you see the potential of the two sides, but this is not down to me.

"Last season I was critical of Madrid but I think maybe this time, based on how the Super Cup went, that they will try take us on and pressure us in attack."

The game will overshadow the other top-flight action this weekend, even though Valencia will only be a point behind Barcelona if they win their match at Real Betis earlier on Saturday.

Below them, Sevilla can pinch fourth place if they beat a Levante side on a downward spiral of just one win in five games.

Bayern seek vital win

AFP, Berlin



Stuttgart on Sunday, with three rivals poised to knock them off top spot if they falter.

After hammering Werder Bremen 4-1 last weekend, Bayern are top by a point and need to win at mid-table Stuttgart to keep their rivals at bay with two weekends left before the winter break starts.

Defending champions Borussia Dortmund are at home to strugglers Kaiserslautern on Sunday, while third-placed

FIXTURES	
Saturday	
(1430GMT unless otherwise stated):	
Werder Bremen v VfL Wolfsburg, Mainz 05 v Hamburg, Nuremberg v Hoffenheim, Cologne v Freiburg, Augsburg v Borussia Moenchengladbach, Hannover 96 v Bayer Leverkusen (1730GMT)	
Sunday	
Borussia Dortmund v Kaiserslautern (1430GMT), VfB Stuttgart v Bayern	

Borussia Moenchengladbach are at bottom side Augsburg on Saturday.

Both Bayern's main rivals should pick up the points to keep the pressure on, while fourth-placed Schalke could provisionally draw level on points with the leaders if they win at Hertha Berlin on Friday.

"It's especially important we get back to winning again immediately," urged Munich's Thomas Mueller ahead of the trip to Stuttgart, having sat out Bayern's Champions League defeat at Manchester City on Wednesday with illness.

Mueller and striker Mario Gomez, the league's top scorer, are both struggling with flu, while Dutch winger Arjen Robben and Germany midfielder Toni Kroos missed the 2-0 defeat in Manchester for the same reason.

Carvalho out of El Clasico

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho will have a full squad to choose from save for Portuguese fullback Ricardo Carvalho for the clasico encounter against Barcelona at the Bernabeu on Saturday, the club said on Friday.

The club said Carvalho has pulled a ligament in his right knee and will be unavailable for the table-topping clash as Real bid to preserve their three-point lead over their rivals.

Also plagued with back problems this season, former Porto and Chelsea man Carvalho has not played for two months.

Rivals look to rebound

AFP, London



Cross-town rivals Manchester City and Manchester United will try to return to winning ways in the Premier League following their shattering group stage exits from the Champions League.

Table-toppers City lead reigning English champions United by five points.

But United, at home to lowly Wolves on Saturday, can cut that gap to just two points with victory at Old Trafford ahead of City's trip to Chelsea on Monday.

While City had the consolation of beating Bayern Munich in their final Champions League match, United's defeat by unheralded Basel will have set alarm bells ringing for Sir Alex Ferguson's side.

And that defeat could be made worse if the knee ligament injury suffered by central defender Nemanja Vidic in Switzerland proves as serious as first feared.

United's fans have taunted arch-rivals Liverpool for having had to compete in the Europa League -- the second tier tournament which both Manchester clubs are now in after finishing third in their respective Champions League groups -- and Ferguson showed little enthusiasm for a competition that is sure to drain his squad's resources.

"It's a competition I've never been in with United," he said.

"It does mean one thing. Thursdays all the way through. Thursday and Sundays. That's got to be dealt with. It's not the best, but that's our penalty for not qualifying."

Ferguson's City counterpart, Roberto Mancini, did not expect the Europa League to have a big impact upon the English title race.

"I think that for the Premier League it changes nothing because both teams are in the Europa League," said Mancini.

"The difference is that the Europa League is harder because we play Thursday and we won't have a lot of time to recover for the games but this will be the only difference."

FIXTURES	
(1500GMT unless stated)	
Saturday	
Arsenal v Everton, Bolton v Aston Villa, Liverpool v QPR, Man Utd v Wolves, Norwich v Newcastle, Swansea v Fulham, West Brom v Wigan	
Sunday	
Sunderland v Blackburn Rovers (1330GMT), Stoke v Tottenham (1600GMT)	
Monday	

Arsenal may have lost to Olympiakos in midweek but Arsene Wenger's men had already qualified for the knockout stages of the Champions League.

That, and the failure of the Manchester giants to make it into the last 16, looked anything but likely during the Gunners' stuttering start to the season.

Arsenal, who this weekend celebrate their 125th birthday, will look to make it eight successive Premier League games unbeaten when they face Everton at the Emirates Stadium.

Gunners boss Arsene Wenger again praised striker Robin van Persie who has scored 13 times in his last 10 appearances.

The Dutch forward has suffered a number of fitness problems since his arrival from Feyenoord seven years ago, but he has been injury-free this season and has led by example.

"When you see the player that arrived and the player he is today then you have to give him a lot of credit. His transformation has been exceptional," said Wenger, whose fifth-placed side are still 10 points behind Manchester City.

Saturday's other matches see second bottom Bolton at home to Aston Villa, Liverpool taking on QPR and Norwich up against Newcastle.

Liverpool manager Kenny Dalglish spent the build-up to the game mounting another defence of controversial Uruguayan striker Luis Suarez who is facing two FA charges over his conduct.

"People just jump on the bandwagon and accuse him of this, that and everything else. He's a fantastic footballer and one that every other club would love to have in their side," said Dalglish.

Meanwhile Fulham, fresh from a 1-0 win over Liverpool, travel to promoted side Swansea, while basement club Wigan away to West Brom.

Martin O'Neill's first match as Sunderland manager following the sacking of Steve Bruce sees the Black Cats at home to fellow strugglers Blackburn Rovers while third-placed Tottenham travel to Stoke.

Platini against goal-line tech

REUTERS, Venice

UEFA president Michel Platini reiterated his opposition to goal line technology on Thursday, saying it would only be needed once every 40 years and could lead to "video refereeing"002E

The Frenchman, speaking after a meeting of UEFA's executive committee, also praised Poland and Ukraine's preparations to host Euro 2012, describing progress as "sensational".

World governing body FIFA is pressing ahead with plans to use electronic equipment in incidents where there is a doubt as to whether the ball has crossed the line.

However, European soccer boss Platini has repeatedly said he prefers the system currently used in the Champions League and Europa League where one extra assistant is placed behind each of the goals.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Who is Bangladesh's sports personality of 2011?

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

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BTV

Bangladesh v Pakistan

First Test, Day 2

Live from 9:30am

TEN Action+

La Liga

Levante v Sevilla

Live from 10:55pm

Real Madrid v Barcelona

Live from 2:55am (Sunday)

STAR Cricket

Australia v New Zealand

Second Test, Day 3

Live from 5:30am (Sunday)

ESPN

English Premiership

Man United v Wolves

Live from 9:00pm

STAR Sports

English Premiership



Manchester United defender Nemanja Vidic is stretchered off after an injury during their Champions League match against Basel on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Vidic out for season

 Football

REUTERS, Manchester

Manchester United defender Nemanja Vidic is out for the season after rupturing his cruciate knee ligament in the midweek Champions League defeat by Basel, manager Alex Ferguson said on Friday.

"He's out for the season. He sees a specialist on Monday, also to map out the progress of when he has the operation. It won't be immediate because we have got to let the swelling come down first of all," Ferguson told a news conference.

The Serbia centre-back was carried off on a stretcher during the 2-1 loss in Switzerland on Wednesday which sent United out of the Champions League at the group stage.

"When you saw the replays you realised it was a bad one," Ferguson added ahead of the Premier League match at home to Wolverhampton Wanderers on Saturday (1500 GMT).

The 30-year-old Vidic left the St. Jakob-

Park stadium on crutches and his agent said on Thursday the defender had "suffered a ruptured cruciate ligament".

"We'll now have to choose between Jonny Evans, Phil Jones and Chris Smalling (to replace Vidic)," added Ferguson.

"I thought Rio (Ferdinand) had his best game of season on Wednesday. His experience will be vital.

"(It) is a loss and we missed him (Vidic) in the early part of the season for five weeks with his calf injury against West Brom.

"He's such a dominant character, particularly his defending in the penalty box. That's always a strong feature of his game."

There was better news up front where Bulgarian Dimitar Berbatov could be fit for the visit of Wolves with champions United looking to close the gap on leaders Manchester City to two points before their rivals visit Chelsea on Monday.

"All the rest who are injured are still out. We hope the turn of the year brings all these players back. They should be back by New Year."



Bangladesh v Pakistan

First Test, Day 2

Time: 9:30am

Venue: Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury