

Leo in pantheon of greats

 **Football**
AFP, Paris

Lionel Messi became only the second man to win three consecutive Ballon d'Or awards on Monday and the question now begging to be asked is: could he become the greatest player of all time?

The 24-year-old from Rosario, Santa Fe is not short of silverware but what really sets him apart is the effervescence of his dribbling, the inventiveness of his team play and the extraordinary regularity of his goalscoring.

In 2011, Messi scored 59 goals in 70 club games for Barcelona. It was a figure bettered only by Cristiano Ronaldo (60), but Messi also contributed 37 assists to the Portuguese's 21.

Only Michel Platini had previously won the Ballon d'Or for three years running and Messi now belongs to an elite group also featuring Dutch legends Johan Cruyff and Marco van Basten to have been honoured with the award on three occasions.

Messi has also proven himself capable of rising to the occasion when the sport's biggest prizes are on the line.

His influence echoed long and loud over the closing stages of last season's Champions League, after he netted twice in Barca's semifinal defeat of Ronaldo's Real Madrid and found the target against Manchester United in the final at Wembley.

Barcelona's trophy haul in 2011 meant that Messi now has three Champions League winners' medals and five La Liga crowns to his name.

He has also won the FIFA Club World Cup twice and it is a matter of time until he surpasses Cesar Rodriguez' record

PAST WINNERS
2007: Kaka (BRA)
2008: Cristiano Ronaldo (POR)
2009: Lionel Messi (ARG)
2010: Lionel Messi (ARG)
2011: Lionel Messi (ARG)

of 235 goals for his club.

In terms of pure ability with a football, Messi bears comparison with any player who has ever played the game, but his one Achilles heel is his inability to reproduce his Barcelona form in the light blue and white stripes of his country.

Messi's goalscoring record with Argentina is a disappointing 19 goals in 66 games, and he was unable to prevent his country from crashing out in the quarterfinals at both the 2010 World Cup and last year's Copa America in his homeland.

Traditionalists contend that, for all his astonishing exploits at club level, he cannot be compared to Pele or his feted

AWARDS FACTFILE
FIFA Ballon d'Or: Lionel Messi (ARG/Barcelona)
FIFA Coach of the Year: Pep Guardiola (ESP/Barcelona)
FIFPro World XI: Iker Casillas (ESP/Real Madrid); Dani Alves (BRA/Barcelona), Nemanja Vidic (SRB/Manchester United), Gerard Pique (ESP/Barcelona), Sergio Ramos (ESP/Real Madrid); Xavi (ESP/Barcelona), Xabi Alonso (ESP/Real Madrid), Andres Iniesta (ESP/Barcelona); Lionel Messi (ARG/Barcelona), Wayne Rooney (ENG/Manchester United), Cristiano Ronaldo (POR/Real Madrid)
FIFA Puskas Award (best goal): Neymar (BRA/Santos)
FIFA Women's Player of the Year: Homare Sawa (JPN/INAC Kobe Leonessa)
FIFA Women's Coach of the Year: Norio Sasaki (JPN/Japan)
FIFA Presidential Award: Sir Alex Ferguson (SCO/Manchester United)
FIFA Fair Play Award: Japanese Football Federation

countryman Diego Maradona until he has left his imprint on a major international tournament.

His next opportunity will arrive at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, when -- at the age of 26 -- he should be in prime position to showcase his gifts on the game's most prestigious stage.

"I still have this dream and that is to be a world champion and lift the Copa America with the national side," said Messi recently.

"And I know I'll do it, I'm convinced I will."

Away from the sport, Messi cuts a far more bashful figure than his great rival Ronaldo, but that has not prevented him from amassing a huge personal fortune through several lucrative endorsements, notably with Adidas.

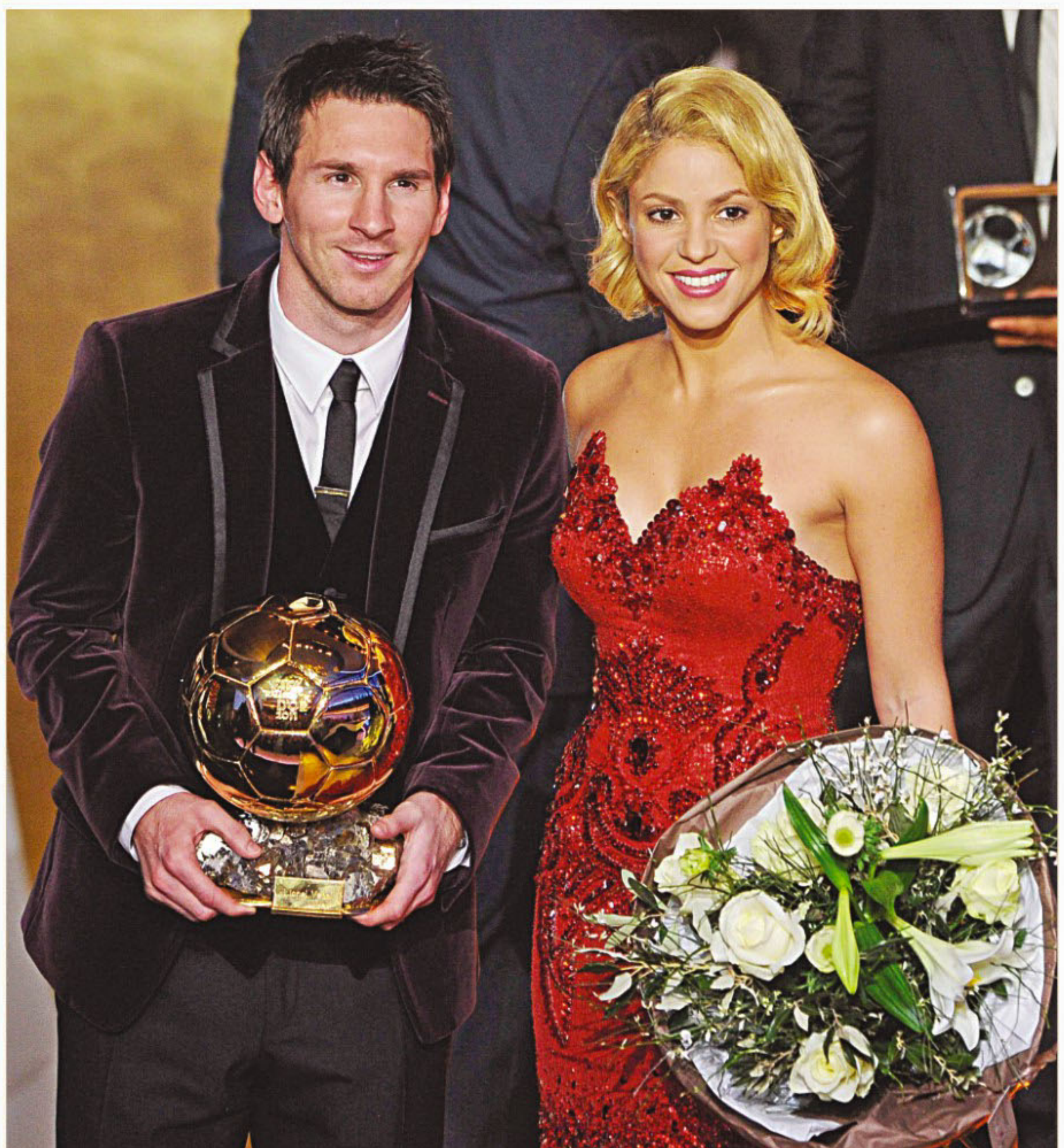
He was named one of Time magazine's people of 2011 and is also a UNICEF goodwill ambassador, but it is through his dazzling dribbling, his carefully weighted passing and his artful finishing that he has earned his global fame.

Typically deployed by Barca coach Pep Guardiola in a roving forward role, he roams the pitch with seemingly boyish abandon and few things hush a stadium more quickly than the sight of Messi embarking on one of his gambolling runs towards goal.

"There are no words left to describe him -- he is interplanetary," said Real Zaragoza coach Jose Aurelio Gay in March 2010.

"We could have beaten Barcelona but we could never have beaten Leo Messi. If we had scored four, he would have scored 12."

The terrifying thought for Barcelona's rivals is that he is still getting better.



Barcelona and Argentina forward Lionel Messi (L) poses with Colombian singer Shakira after receiving the FIFA Ballon d'Or award in Zurich on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Donadoni replaces Colomba

AFP, Rome

Former Italy coach Roberto Donadoni has been named the new coach of Serie A side Parma after Franco Colomba was unceremoniously dismissed following a heavy defeat.

Donadoni, who coached Italy from 2006-2008, had been out of work for six months since being fired by Cagliari during pre-season, straight after a friendly victory.

Colomba paid for Saturday's 5-0 thrashing at Inter Milan, the third time this season his side had been heavily beaten by a leading contender, following 4-1 defeats against AC Milan and Juventus.

It was a sixth game in a row without victory, although they only lost two of those and their last success was a hugely impressive 2-0 defeat of high-flying Udinese on November 20.

Colomba thus became the 11th coach to lose his job in Italy's Serie A already this season.

Henry eyes more goals

AFP, London

Thierry Henry is determined to extend his Arsenal goalscoring record after making a fairytale return for the Londoners in the FA Cup victory over Leeds.

The 34-year-old delighted the Emirates on Monday by scoring the winner in his first game since rejoining the Premier League giants on a two-month loan deal from the New York Red Bulls.

Henry, Arsenal's all-time leading goalscorer who recently had a statue erected outside the Emirates in his honour, is now hoping to add to his tally as the Gunners battle on three fronts.

"I never thought I was going to play for Arsenal again or score a winner," Henry said. "I love the club and I hope I can do more."

"I hope it won't be the last one. The feeling I had when I scored was amazing."

"I rejoined the club as a fan; before I wasn't. Scoring a goal when you support the team, now I know how some of the guys who played for Liverpool or Man United or Chelsea felt when they scored a goal for the club they support."

Henry's dream return

AFP, London



Thierry Henry needed just over 10 minutes to mark his Arsenal return with the winning goal as Leeds United were edged out 1-0 at the Emirates Stadium in the FA Cup third round on Monday.

The former France international, 34, left the Gunners in June 2007 as the club's record goal-scorer and returned last week on a two-month loan from New York Red Bulls.

He could hardly have made a more impressive comeback, showing his colleagues how to finish after Leeds, currently eighth in the Championship, held out stubbornly until the 79th minute, 11 minutes after Henry had come on to a rapturous welcome from the home fans.

It was his 227th Gunners goal and Arsenal's reward is a fourth round tie at home to Aston Villa.

The 1998 World Cup winner settled a game that was a repeat of the draw for the same round last season, which saw Leeds come within a handful of seconds from winning at the Emirates Stadium but went on to lose in the replay.

Arsene Wenger had allowed captain and top scorer Robin van Persie to take a holiday, with Marouane Chamakh taking his place up front before departing for the Africa Cup of Nations.

Otherwise it was close to being as strong a starting line-up as a series of injuries to defenders would allow, with Wojciech Szczesny, Aaron Ramsey, Alex Song, captain for the night Mikel Arteta and Andrey Arshavin all included.

Henry, as expected, began on the bench,

as did Theo Walcott, the inheritor of the number 14 shirt the Frenchman left behind four-and-a-half years ago when he decamped to Barcelona.

An early error by Leeds defender Aidan White allowed Chamakh to give Arshavin a clear sight of goal but the Russian blasted his shot well over Andy Lonergan's crossbar.

Sebastien Squillaci headed just wide from an Arteta free-kick in the 15th minute before Aaron Ramsey fired over on the run from the next attack. Ramsey twice went close in the next five minutes, with Arteta also sending a low drive just wide.

Arsenal's defensive problems increased when Francis Coquelin, playing at right-back, pulled up with a hamstring injury and had to be replaced by 18-year-old Nico Yennaris in the 33rd minute.

The second half began with a run from Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and a shot that went wide and Arshavin failed to hit the target with a first-time effort from Ignasi Miquel's diagonal ball forwards.

Still Arsenal came forward in search of unlocking a packed Leeds defence. Lonergan was required to dive to his left to keep out Arteta's shot after Chamakh had set him up before Arshavin fired across goal and just wide.

Lonergan was required again, to beat away Oxlade-Chamberlain's drive from distance as Henry prepared to make his 68th-minute entrance, along with Walcott.

Henry's magic moment arrived in the 79th minute and it was a finish typical of the player in his previous prime.

Song played the ball forward, Henry timed his run behind the Leeds back-line perfectly and slotted across Lonergan before embarking on a lively celebration in front of his manager.



Arsenal legend Thierry Henry is ecstatic after scoring the all-important goal against Leeds United during their FA Cup encounter at the Emirates Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Platini lauds Messi

AFP, Zurich

UEFA president Michel Platini heralded Lionel Messi as "a killer" on Monday after the Barcelona star matched the Frenchman's record of having won three consecutive Ballon d'Or awards.

Messi, 24, was awarded the 2011 FIFA Ballon d'Or at a ceremony in Zurich, which made him the first player to win the honour for three years running since Platini did so during his Juventus heyday between 1983 and 1985.

Messi's achievements with Barcelona, with whom he won five trophies last year, have prompted comparisons

Moratti after Tevez

Football

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti hasn't given up hope of securing the signature of Carlos Tevez, despite neighbours AC Milan appearing to be in prime position to land the Argentine.

Milan have already made two offers to Manchester City and have agreed terms with the 27-year-old.

But Moratti allegedly tried to trump his cross-town rivals last week by tabling a bid believed to be worth 25 million euros.

He denied that was just a spoiling tactic and said he is hopeful a deal can still be reached.

with some of the greatest names in the game's history, but Platini believes it is too early to start judging his career.

"Let him finish his career," said the former France captain.

"Things go very quickly in football. You know, when Ronaldinho won his first Ballon d'Or (in 2005), I said: 'He's going to win a lot more, this guy.' And he didn't win any more after that."

"But Messi is the whole package. He needs to have a team like Barcelona, and he's a killer in his soul."

"He seems nice and kind, but to score goals like that, you have to be a killer. You don't win anything in football if you're too nice."

Messi occasionally receives criticism over his inability to replicate his

club form with Argentina and some critics feel he cannot be compared to greats such as Pele and Diego Maradona until he has won the World Cup.

Platini, though, feels that time is on his side.

"At 24, he still has time to win it," said Platini.

"He's already a superb, fantastic player. You shouldn't try to place him in time. He's the great player of this generation, like there were great players in other generations."

"It's only in football that people compare generations. I've never heard someone compare (Italian singer) Adriano Celentano, the Beatles or Edith Piaf, but in football it happens."

Bayern dazzle Indian fans

Football

AFP, New Delhi

European giants Bayern Munich dazzled nearly 35,000 cheering fans during an impressive 4-0 win over India in an exhibition game on Tuesday.

The match, played under lights at the Jawaharlal Nehru stadium in New Delhi, marked the farewell of India's soccer hero Baichung Bhutia, who announced his international retirement in August last year after a string of injuries.

The star-studded German outfit were hardly tested during the friendly encounter which was their final outing before the resumption of the Bundesliga following a four-week winter break.

Jupp Heynckes' troupe currently lead the domestic league after having played 17 games so far.

Bayern have also been in impressive form in the Champions League, a tournament they are especially keen on, with the final set to take place at their home ground -- the Allianz Arena -- in May.

The Bavarians took the lead in the 14th minute through in-form striker Mario Gomez before World Cup Golden Boot winner Thomas Muller slammed in a brace to make it 3-0 for the visitors.

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION
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Semifinal
Man City v Liverpool
Live from 1:40am (Thursday)
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Sportscenter India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm
English Premiership
Tottenham v Everton
Live from 2:00am (Thursday)



Fed Cup Football
Farashganj SC v Wari Club
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Brothers Union v Rahmatganj MFS
Venue: Kamalapur Stadium
Both matches start at 3:00pm
Premier Div Cricket League
Gazi Tank v Kalabagan
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Mirpur
Mohammedan v Victoria
Venue: Fatullah Cricket Stadium
Abahani v Surjo Tarun
Venue: BKSP-2