

Leo slays Bayer

AFP, Barcelona



Lionel Messi became the first player to score five goals in a Champions League tie as Barcelona routed Bayer Leverkusen 7-1 to reach the quarterfinals with a crushing 10-2 aggregate win on Wednesday.

Messi bettered his previous record of four against Arsenal two seasons ago and now has 12 goals from seven Champions League matches after a majestic attacking performance from the World Player of the Year.

Fabregas knocked the ball over the top and Messi chipped the keeper with his supposedly weaker right foot.

With important games ahead, Barca coach Pep Guardiola chose to take off Iniesta and Xavi after 52 minutes with Tello and Seydou Keita coming on.

But there was no let up in Barca's thrust and the night went from bad to worse for an already dejected Bayer who had only fleeting glimpses of the ball.

They created their first chance nine minutes into the second half when Eren Derdiyok saw a shot from the tightest of angles go wide but then immediately the ball went to the other end of the pitch and Tello added Barca's fourth.

He latched onto a Fabregas pass and then showed composure belying his 20 years to calmly slot the ball past the keeper.

Bayer had lost their composure at the back and then Leno, who was having a night to forget between the posts, gifted the ball to Messi who slipped the ball in from a tight angle for his fourth.

The keeper was again at fault as he allowed a weak Tello shot to squirm underneath him after 61 minutes and could do nothing to stop Messi's fifth with six minutes to go as he again finished clinically.

The Argentine beat the offside trap and lobbed the helpless keeper.

There was no let up in the Barca onslaught and an apparently miss-hit pass from Adriano again found Messi but his shot from the edge of the area was blocked.

Three minutes before the break and Barca did get their second as Messi feinted one way and then the other before slotting the ball into the corner from 18 yards.

Messi claimed his hat-trick soon after the re-start from another lob with the German defence failing to track his run.

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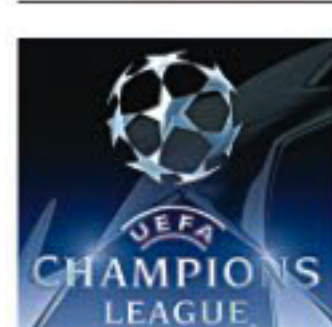
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5-star Messi

AFP, Barcelona



Lionel Messi's record five-goal haul in the 7-1 Champions League rout of Bayer Leverkusen prompted Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola to hail the Argentine master as the game's greatest talent.

Guardiola was not alone in his admiration after the defending champions sailed into the quarterfinals on a 10-2 aggregate.

Robin Dutt, the coach of the vanquished Germans, insisted that Messi made Barcelona look as if they came from "another galaxy" while England striker Wayne Rooney took to Twitter to anoint the superstar as "the best ever".

"I am fortunate to have Messi in the team and all I can do is try and create the conditions so that he plays his best football," said Guardiola.

"You won't see anyone else like him. People said that Di Stefano, Maradona and Cruyff were the best when they were playing and now it is the same for Messi. He is on the throne and it is down to him how long he stays there."

"This time Messi got five. Maybe the next time he will get six. These are only figures but he will always keep trying to get another goal because that is his personality," said Guardiola.

Messi, as always, preferred the under-statement to superlatives.

"I'm happy, it's great to score a five, but the important thing tonight was the win and to qualify for the quarterfinals. Now, no matter who we meet, it's going to be very complicated, there are only good sides left in," he said.

"We know it's hard for us in the Liga (10 points behind Real Madrid), but we want to defend our Champions League title and we are also keeping in our minds on the Spanish Cup."

Dutt did not hold back in his praise for Barca and their guiding force.

"There are no words to describe this performance from them, it was extraordinary, there is no doubt," said Dutt.

"Without Messi, they are still the best but with him they are from another galaxy."

Barca teammate Cesc Fabregas insisted no-one should be surprised by Messi's latest landmark.

"You can expect anything from Leo," said Fabregas. "He is the best player in history, we have never seen anyone like him."

Rooney, whose Manchester United side failed to make the last 16, insisted he had witnessed a genius at work.

"Messi is a joke. For me, the best ever," he tweeted.

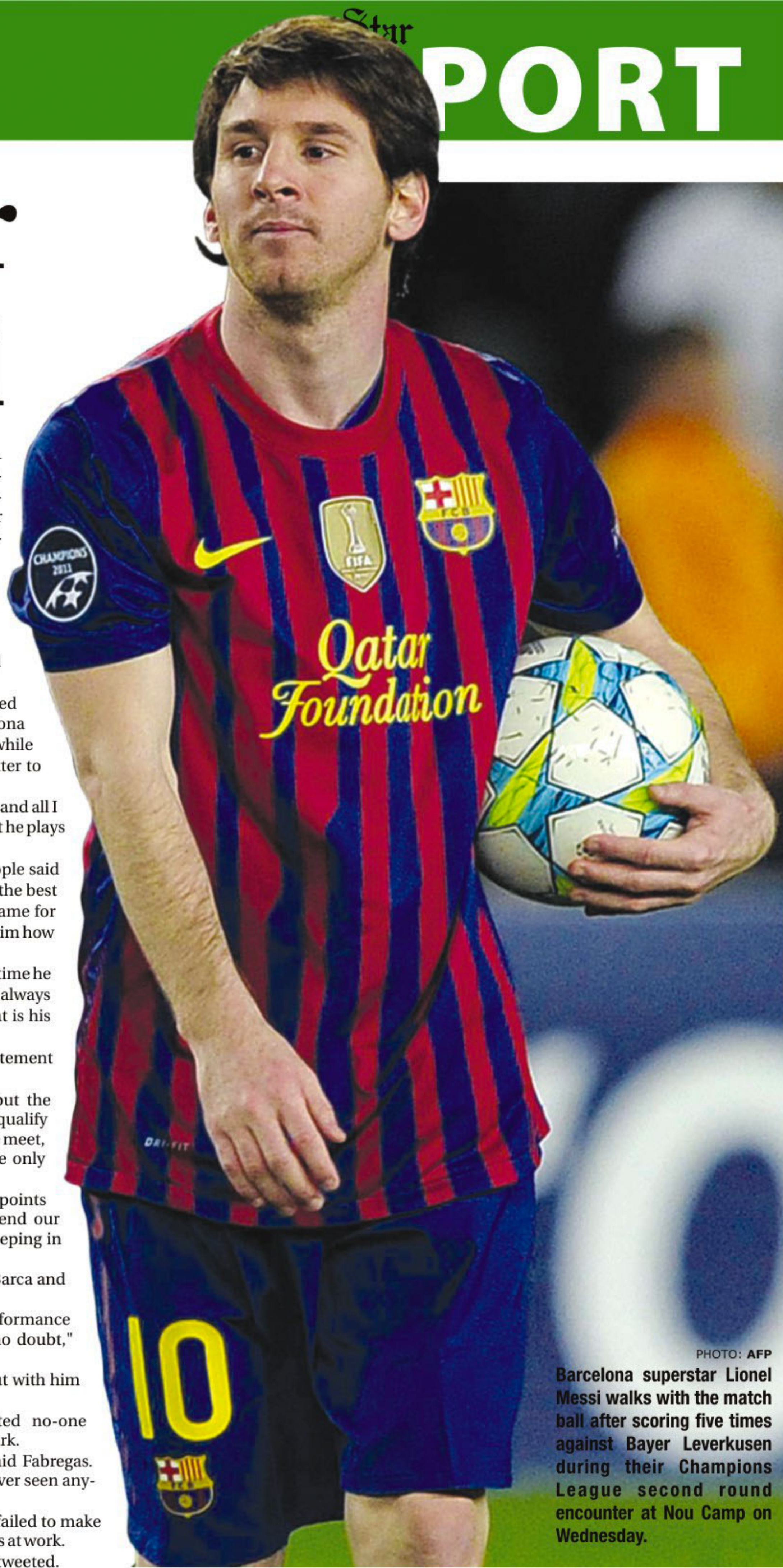


PHOTO: AFP
Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi walks with the match ball after scoring five times against Bayer Leverkusen during their Champions League second round encounter at Nou Camp on Wednesday.

City eyeing Van Persie

AFP, London

Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini has confirmed his interest in Arsenal's Robin Van Persie but believes the prolific Dutch striker will ultimately extend his contract with the Gunners.

Van Persie's contract with Arsenal expires in 2013 and a number of clubs have been alerted to the possibility of a shock summer move because he has ruled out discussing his future until then.

Despite his interest in the Dutchman, who has scored an impressive 32 goals already this season, Mancini believes Arsenal will move quickly to make sure he accepts a new deal.

Quoted in several national newspapers, the Italian said: "We are interested in all good players. This is normal, but not only us. I think all the good teams are interested in Van Persie."

"I think Van Persie at this moment is one of the best strikers in Europe with Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo and with Sergio Aguero and Mario Balotelli. I think he is a fantastic striker, but I think he will remain with Arsenal."

City have signed several Arsenal players in recent years, acquiring Samir Nasri last summer and also signing Gael Clichy, Kolo Toure and Emmanuel Adebayor.

Mancini added: "I think if there is a good player who wants to leave a club, then we are interested."

"But if this player wants to stay, we don't have any problem. In my opinion, Van Persie will stay at Arsenal."

"I think Robin van Persie will sign a new contract with Arsenal because if Arsenal lose also Van Persie, they will have a big problem."

"I think Arsenal will buy good players in the summer. Arsenal is a top team. They want to win the next Premier League, so for these reasons I think he will stay."

Defoe fires Spurs

AFP, London



Jermain Defoe scored twice as Tottenham Hotspur came from behind to book an FA Cup quarterfinal spot with a 3-1 fifth round replay win at home to third tier Stevenage at White Hart Lane here on Wednesday.

Joel Byrom opened the scoring for the visitors and the League One side sensed a famous victory, only for England striker Defoe to level before the break.

Emmanuel Adebayor edged Spurs in front with a penalty before Defoe added his 15th goal of the season in the 75th minute to give eight-times FA Cup winners Tottenham a home quarterfinal against Premier League strugglers Bolton.

Only two players remained from the team defeated by English champions Manchester United last time out but Spurs, third in the Premier League, appeared to have a strong-enough team to face lower-league opposition.

But within four minutes they were trailing after Byrom surged into the penalty area and went over on the challenge of New Zealand's Ryan Nelsen.

Spurs players protested that the ball would have gone out of play if Byrom stayed on his feet.

But referee Michael Oliver pointed to the spot and the Stevenage midfielder scored the penalty himself, sending Carlo Cudicini the wrong way.

Stevenage were looking for a second goal and Jon Ashton headed just over from a free-kick in the 26th minute, only for Spurs to level seconds later.

Cudicini's punt down field found Defoe, who took a touch to speed away from Ashton and then drove into the bottom corner.

Early in the second half, Italian shot-stopper Cudicini made a stunning close range save to deny Mark Roberts when the Stevenage captain found room from a corner and prodded towards goal with a left-footed effort.

But it was Roberts who conceded a key penalty nine minutes into the second period, tripping Bale on the right-hand side of the area before Adebayor stroked in the spot-kick.

Bale almost scored himself before the hour but his dipping drive crashed against the crossbar.



PHOTO: AFP

Tottenham Hotspur striker Jermain Defoe (R) is congratulated by teammate Niko Kranjcar after scoring his first goal against Stevenage during their FA Cup fifth round replay at White Hart Lane on Wednesday.

Mario fined week's wages

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini has fined Mario Balotelli one week's wages after the Italian striker was pictured outside a strip club less than two days before a league game.

The 21-year-old accepted the punishment -- believed to be around £120,000 -- after being pictured outside the club in Liverpool in the early hours of Friday morning, contravening club regulations ahead of Saturday's game against Bolton.

Balotelli went on to play and score in the Premier League leaders' 2-0 win at the Etihad Stadium but Mancini expressed his disappointment and pledged to investigate.

Mancini said Wednesday: "I spoke with Mario and gave him a fine of one week's wages for what he did."

"This is normal because every player should have good behaviour before the game."

Arsenal agree Podolski fee

AFP, Berlin

Germany forward Lukas Podolski is to quit Cologne at the end of the season to join Arsenal for 13 million euros, the daily tabloid Bild said on Thursday.

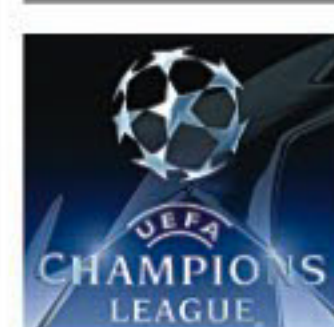
The German club, currently 14th in the Bundesliga, made no confirmation of the claim but Bild, which is generally well-informed, said he had accepted terms with the English Premier League side.

Podolski, 26, has agreed terms on a four-year deal that will see him earn an annual salary of some seven million euros (\$9.2 million), the newspaper said.

The attacker was transferred in 2009 from Bayern Munich to Cologne, where he played at the start of his career.

APOEL in dreamland

REUTERS, Nicosia



APOEL Nicosia again ripped the Champions League record books to shreds and kicked off an island party by becoming the first Cypriot team to make the last eight of any European competition on Wednesday.

A 4-3 win on penalties over Olympique Lyon after a deserved 1-0 home victory in their last-16 second leg followed the shock achievement of finishing top of their qualifying group in Europe's elite club competition.

Tiny Cyprus, a minnow in European football terms, burst into celebrations as thousands of APOEL supporters poured into the streets of Nicosia after the nail-biting ending.

"This is a fantastic result. The team deserved this. We got to where we wanted, with the eight best teams in Europe. Now we feel we can move forward, and deal with any team that

comes," APOEL chairman Phivos Erotocritou told reporters.

Lyon's Alexandre Lacazette and Michel Bastos had their spot-kicks confidently saved by Dionisios Chiotis, who was also unlucky that Lisandro Lopez's penalty went in off his back.

APOEL scored all four of their spot-kicks with aplomb to send their team mates and fervent fans into delirium in the tight GSP Stadium, with Chiotis mobbed on the pitch.

Gustavo Manduca, sent off in extra time for a second booking, had earlier netted at the far post on nine minutes after Constantinos Charalambides had slid in a cross as APOEL levelled the aggregate scores after losing the first leg 1-0.

"We knew we would have to try very hard, that it was not going to be an easy game, but the players put in an excellent performance," said APOEL coach Ivan Jovanovic.

"I think the players were very focused and at the end we were vindicated by our qualification. Just saying it, believe me, it's something fantastic."

Lyon, who came into the game on the back of poor domestic form, fielded a defensive lineup with first-leg scorer Lacazette and top scorer Bafetimbi Gomis starting on the bench.

Manduca's goal forced under pressure Lyon coach Remi Garde to urge his side forward and Ederson's overhit free kick almost sneaked in before his diving header bounced wide but that was as close as the French side came.

"It's an immense disappointment," Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas said after his side bowed out at the last-16 stage for the fifth time in six seasons.

"That first goal put us in a difficult situation. Playing for qualification here is like playing with fire. I tip my hat to APOEL."

Lyon won seven French titles in a row in the last decade but now lie seventh in Ligue 1 and are all but out of contention for a Champions League place next term.

under sustained pressure, although their makeshift centre-back pairing -- including full-back Martin Caceres as both Andrea Barzagli and Giorgio Chiellini were injured -- had a largely quiet night.

That was until Leonardo Bonucci was dismissed six minutes from time for a second booking meaning that if Juve don't get one of Barzagli or Chiellini back this weekend, they will have no specialist centre-halves against Genoa.

It wasn't such a quiet night for Juve coach Antonio Conte, either, who was sent to the stands in the second half for protesting.

Bologna took the lead with a goal of sumptuous quality as Gaston Ramirez's perfectly-weighted pass allowed Di Vaio to beat the offside trap and the veteran forward finished expertly first time past the onrushing Gianluigi Buffon.

Having been so disciplined and organised in the first period, Bologna momentarily lost their shape 14 minutes into the second half, and they paid dearly.

Pirlo sliced open the defence with an inch-perfect through ball that Vucinic met first time with a clever dink to beat Gillet.

Juventus lose ground

AFP, Rome



Juventus maintained their unbeaten run this season but fell behind AC Milan in the Serie A title race following a 1-1 draw at Bologna on Wednesday.

The Old Lady of Turin failed to make the most of their game in hand on the champions and now trail Milan by two points with 12 matches left.

Veteran captain Marco Di Vaio gave the hosts a 17th minute lead but Montenegro forward Mirko Vucinic equalised just before the hour mark.

Juve have not lost in 26 league games this season -- and 29 matches including the Italian Cup -- but they have drawn exactly half of those.

And that is the reason they are looking up at Milan rather than down.

Had they won, Juve would have gone above Milan due to their better head-to-head record.

Once again the Turin giants proved lacking in attack as they failed to put Bologna



NEO Cricket
New Zealand v South Africa
First Test, Day 4

Live from 3:30am (Saturday)

TEN Action
Serie A
Chievo v Inter Milan

Live from 1:45am (Saturday)

ESPN
Sportscentre India
Sports News



Premier League
Abahani v Sk Russel

Time: 3:45pm
Venue: Bangabandhu

SPORTS POLL

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