



Wigan Athletic striker Franco Di Santo (C) is about to score the opening goal against Arsenal during their Premier League encounter at the Emirates Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Van Persie heads PFA shortlist

AFP, London

Arsenal striker Robin van Persie headed the list of nominees for the 2011-12 Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) Players' Player of the Year award announced on Monday.

The Dutchman, who has scored 27 league goals this season, is joined on the shortlist by the Manchester City trio of goalkeeper Joe Hart, midfielder David Silva and striker Sergio Aguero.

Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Scott Parker and England striker Wayne Rooney of league leaders Manchester United complete the line-up.

Aguero was also named on the shortlist for the young players' equivalent prize, alongside Spurs pair Kyle Walker and Gareth Bale, Arsenal's Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, Chelsea's Daniel Sturridge and United's Danny Welbeck.

The winner will be announced at the PFA's annual awards ceremony on Sunday evening.

Bale won last season's senior award, while Rooney received the prize in 2010.

Chelsea's toughest test

AFP, London

Chelsea believe they can stymie the jaw-dropping goalscoring exploits of Lionel Messi and pull off an unlikely upset against Barcelona in the Champions League semifinals here Wednesday.

Messi took his season's tally to an astonishing 63 goals in 52 games at the weekend with a double strike in Barcelona's win over Levante, leaving him just four shy of Gerd Muller's all-time single-season European record of 67.

Another goal at Stamford Bridge would see the Argentinian set a new benchmark for goals in a single Champions League campaign, taking him past the record he currently shares with Jose Altafini, who scored 14 for AC Milan in 1962-63.

Referring to Messi's ongoing scoring duel with Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo, Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola said recently that the two players were "eating at a separate table to the rest."

The challenge for Chelsea on Wednesday is finding a way to prevent Messi from treating the English club's ageing back four as an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Yet Chelsea's elder statesmen -- almost certainly featuring together in a Champions League campaign for the last time -- are refusing to be cowed by

Messi and Barcelona's reputation as one of the best teams of all time.

"From the start of every game, it's 50-50," Chelsea veteran Frank Lampard said. "We are in the Champions League semifinal on merit. We can't show too much fear against them. We have to respect them but also take them on and play the way we play."

"When I watch Barcelona I expect them to win but you have to believe in yourselves. We have given them tough games in the past and we are ready to try to do that again."

Nevertheless Lampard is under no illusions about the scale of the task in front of Chelsea, who come into the game with useful momentum following the 5-1 FA Cup semifinal thrashing of Tottenham at Wembley.

Lampard believes Messi has already surpassed Diego Maradona in the pantheon of all-time greats.

"He has improved since we played them in 2009 and he was a fantastic player then. The levels he has taken his game to is something I have never seen before," Lampard said.

"I grew up on Maradona. He was my idol and I think Messi has taken it to higher levels than him. To get close to 70 goals is crazy. He deserves it. He is the best player in the world."

Chelsea's last meeting with Barcelona came in the semi-finals three years ago, when Andres Iniesta's injury-time equaliser and a string of

dubious refereeing decisions denied the English side a place in the final.

Lampard said Chelsea would not be entering the match motivated by a sense of revenge. "That's not really in our thoughts," Lampard said. "They have moved on from three years ago and we have changed as well."

Chelsea's interim manager Roberto Di Matteo is likely to target Barcelona's back four as he attempts to mastermind what would be the greatest win since he took over from the sacked Andre Villas-Boas in March.

Di Matteo is adamant that there are weak links in Barcelona's armour. "We just need to exploit them," Di Matteo said.

"You look at the way you can hurt Barcelona and create them difficulties. I've seen many games."

Di Matteo was also wary of obsessing about the threat posed by Messi.

"It's not just about stopping a single player, because obviously they have so many players that can hurt you," he cautioned. "It has to be a team tactic, a team strategy, to be able to limit their threat."

Barcelona coach Guardiola means while says he is unfazed by the prospect of a physical approach from Chelsea.

"Am I worried by Chelsea's physical approach? No, I'm not worried," Guardiola said. "I'm used to it."

"We have the mentality to control this situation. It's very important to have this mentality."

Wigan stun Arsenal

AFP, London

Wigan Athletic added to last week's surprise victory over Premier League leaders Manchester United by beating third-place Arsenal 2-1 at the Emirates Stadium on Monday night.

Two early goals turned out to be enough for Roberto Martinez's side to pull off an even more unexpected success which significantly improves their chances of avoiding relegation.

The Latics are now five points clear of third-bottom Bolton Wanderers, who have two games in hand, in a five-team tussle to avoid the drop.

The result was a blow to Arsene Wenger's Gunners' hopes of holding off the challenges of Tottenham and Newcastle and qualify for the Champions League in third place.

Had they won they would have been eight points clear of both rivals, who now each have a game in hand with which to lessen a five-point gap.

Wenger made one change from the side that had won 3-0 at Wolverhampton Wanderers last week, with Tomas Rosicky replacing Aaron Ramsey in midfield.

Wigan were unable to call upon forward Shaun Maloney, whose goal had inflicted defeat upon United on the same night, so Jordi Gomez returned to the starting line-up.

Thomas Vermaelen fired an early Arsenal effort wide before Wigan goalkeeper Ali Al-Habsi tipped Yossi Benayoun's header over after Bacary Sagna had picked out the Israeli in front of goal.

The corner, in the seventh minute, was easily cleared however - and Wigan scored

on the counter attack.

Franco Di Santo was the scorer after Gomez had put him one on one with goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny. The Pole got a touch to the Argentine's shot but the ball looped up and Di Santo was able to find the net before defenders could intervene.

It took Wigan all of a minute and a half to make it 2-0, with Gomez the scorer this time. Victor Moses turned Sagna and delivered a cross from the left that James McArthur could not convert at the near post but Szczesny was unable to grab the ball and Gomez was there in a flash to poke home.

The home fans were shocked into silence and Arsenal made a change straight away with Mikel Arteta, seemingly having injured a foot taking a free-kick, replaced by Ramsey in the ninth minute.

Al-Habsi was soon required to make another acrobatic save to keep out a header bound for the top corner, with Benayoun again the man denied when he met Rosicky's cross.

However the Oman international didn't even move when Vermaelen powered a header past him in the 21st minute, with the Belgian leaping unchallenged to meet Rosicky's delivery from the right.

Premier League top scorer Robin van Persie was next to have a go and again Al-Habsi pulled off a save. Johan Djourou was guilty of poor finishing however when he poked wide from eight yards a minute later.

Wigan made it to half time with their lead intact and soaked up pressure straight after the restart but Moses' pace and strength saw him get the better of Sagna again, with Szczesny having to parry the shot the followed.

Alves taunts Chelsea

AFP, London

Barcelona defender Dani Alves has lit the touch paper for Wednesday's Champions League semifinal with Chelsea by suggesting fear cost the Premier League side victory in the 2009 semifinals.

Chelsea were controversially eliminated by the Catalans in the last four three years ago following a string of hotly-disputed calls from Norwegian referee Tom Henning Ovrebo, who turned down four penalty appeals.

However Alves told The Independent on Tuesday that Chelsea only had themselves to blame for failing to clinch victory, after midfielder Andres Iniesta's injury-time strike sent Barcelona through to the final on away goals.

"There is no doubt that was the hardest game we've played, but a team with a man advantage playing at home and winning should have attacked us more," Alves told the daily.

"People say Chelsea should have won but for the referee, but that is not our problem. We were there to play football, to compete and try to get to the final. Chelsea did not reach the final because of fear."

Meanwhile Iniesta himself warned his team-mates to expect another tough night against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge.

"It's painful to be knocked out so close to the final. Now we are facing each other again and undoubtedly their desire to beat us and be in the Champions League final will be significant," he said.

"We hope that things will turn out well for us again this time."

Jose backs technology

Football

AFP, Munich

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho has backed the growing calls for the introduction of goal-line technology after a key mistake in Tottenham Hotspur's FA Cup semifinal thrashing by Chelsea.

Referee Martin Atkinson controversially ruled an effort by Chelsea's Juan Mata crossed the goal-line in Sunday's FA Cup semifinal victory which put the Blues 2-0 ahead as they went onto record a 5-1 win over their London rivals.

Spurs boss Harry Redknapp has led renewed calls for video technology to be introduced after replays appeared to show Mata's second-half shot being blocked on the line.

Both Manchester United striker Michael Owen and former Chelsea manager Ruud Gullit made comments calling for the introduction of goal-line technology on their Twitter accounts.

With Real to face Bayern Munich in the Champions League semifinal, first-leg, on Tuesday in Munich, Ex-Chelsea boss Mourinho has echoed the calls to introduce goal-line technology as soon as possible.

"My thoughts about technology are the same as everyone else," said the 49-year-old Mourinho at a press conference here.

"I lost a Champions League semifinal with a goal that was not a goal, the ball didn't cross the line, so I defend the goal-line technology."

Mourinho was referring to the controversial goal scored by Liverpool's Luis Garcia which put the Reds in the 2005 Champions League final at Chelsea's expense when they went onto beat AC Milan in a dramatic pen-

alty shoot-out.

The Spaniard's fourth-minute strike in the Anfield semifinal, second leg, gave Liverpool a 1-0 win on aggregate following a 0-0 draw at Stamford Bridge, but the goal needed confirmation from the match officials.

"There will be two very experienced referees tomorrow and they will have a privileged position to help the referee make the correct decision," he said.

The news means that this weekend's programme will go ahead as planned.

There had been a speculation that last weekend's 33rd round matches would be played this weekend with the 34th round moved into the following midweek.

Postponed games rescheduled

AFP, Rome

Last weekend's postponed Italian Serie A programme will now be played on April 24 and 25, the Italian Football League confirmed on Monday.

It means Italian top flight clubs will all play five times within a two week period starting this weekend.

The 33rd round of matches had been postponed as a mark of respect due to the death Saturday of Livorno's Piermario Morosini during a Serie B encounter at Pescara.

Two of the matches will be played in the early evening on Tuesday, April 24 with the rest played on Wednesday, April 25 in the afternoon and early evening.

The matches cannot be played on the usual 20.45 kick-off times due to the Barcelona-Chelsea and Real Madrid-Bayern Munich Champions League encounters being played on those evenings.

UEFA rules state that no top flight club matches in Europe can take place at the same time as Champions League football.

Atalanta-Chievo and Cagliari-Catania will both be played on the Tuesday at 1830 local time with all other matches played on the Wednesday, a national holiday in Italy.

It means that most of the Wednesday matches can be played at 1500 local time, as it happens on Sundays.

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SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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TEN Cricket

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Live from 8:00pm

TEN Action

UEFA Champions League

Chelsea v Barcelona

Live from 12:45am (Thursday)