



Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi celebrates one of his three goals against Malaga during their Primera Liga clash at Nou Camp on Wednesday. This hatrick took his tally to an unbelievable 68 goals.

PHOTO: AFP

King of goals

Football

AGENCIES, Barcelona

A Lionel Messi hat-trick that saw him break Gerd Mueller's record for goals in a single European season inspired Barcelona to a 4-1 win over Malaga on Wednesday.

Messi's tally of 68 is one better than that mustered by Mueller while playing for Bayern Munich in the 1972-73 season.

Messi converted penalty kicks in the 35th and 59th minutes, then chipped onrushing goalkeeper Carlos Kameni to score in the 64th after a long pass from Andres Iniesta.

Messi has played 57 games for Barcelona this season and has three games left. He has scored a record 46 goals in the Spanish league plus 14 in the Champions League, three in Spanish Super Cup, two each in the Club World Cup and the Copa del Rey, and one in the UEFA Super Cup

While the jury is still debating whether he really deserves to be hailed as the greatest of all time, as some of his colleagues at Barca have labelled him, there is no doubting that Messi is, by quite a distance, the best of his generation. And he has made breaking records his part-time hobby this campaign.

He became only the third player to win the Ballon d'Or three times, he is now the joint top scorer in a single European Cup season with 14 goals, he became the first player to score five goals in a single game in the Champions League era, he is the youngest player to reach 150 La Liga goals, he has surpassed Cristiano Ronaldo's haul of 40 strikes in one league term, he became Barca's all-time top marksman in official games, and of course there is his tally of 68 competitive goals and counting which took him past Muller. All of those were achieved in the first five months of 2012.

But despite his numerous records and goals, there are still countless major milestones that he has yet to shatter, milestones that, many would argue, the 24-year-old has to reach before he can be considered the greatest footballer ever.

A lack of success on the international stage has always been Messi's Achilles heel, and it's one of the main reasons why his fiercest critics, including Pele, have so far refused to recognize him as one of the greatest players of all time.

As for individual honours, Messi could go into the history books in eight months' time if he becomes the first footballer to claim four Ballon d'Or crowns. With the way things are going so far in 2012, you wouldn't bet against him.

Lecce hold Juve

AFP, Rome



Ten-man Lecce threw a spanner in the Serie A title works as they held Juventus to a 1-1 draw on Wednesday, allowing AC Milan to close the gap at the top to just one point.

Juve seemed to be cruising to victory after an early goal while their relegation-threatened opponents were reduced to 10 men early in the second period.

But Andrea Bertolacci's goal five minutes from time snatched a draw and allowed Milan, 2-0 winners over Atalanta, to reduce their arrears.

And it was a horror mistake from Juve goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon that gifted Lecce the equaliser, suggesting the Turin giants might just be cracking under the title pressure.

It ended Juve's eight-match winning run and gives Milan renewed hope of retaining their crown.

Juve were off to a dream start and it came from their fabled midfield.

The incomparable Andrea Pirlo was given too much time on the edge of the box and he put in a delightful chip over the defence for Claudio Marchisio to run onto and although his header looked tame, goalkeeper Massimiliano Boschi seemed to slip and the ball crept in.

Marchisio was next to send a clever chip over the top for Arturo Vidal to run onto but he swept his left foot shot just past the upright.

Any chance Lecce had of dragging themselves back into the contest seemed to die 10 minutes into the second period when Juan Cuadrado was harshly sent off for a second booking.

Juve missed a hatful of chances but then Buffon's first touch from Andrea Barzagli's back-pass was horribly heavy and Bertolucci nipped in to rob him and score.

Milan started brightly and a pair of efforts from Kevin-Prince Boateng and one from Zlatan Ibrahimovic tested goalkeeper Andrea Consigli.

On nine minutes, Boateng found Muntari in the box, although the Ghana midfielder was perhaps offside, to poke in from close range.

It wasn't all one-way traffic as Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati was forced into a diving save to keep out German Denis's header.

RESULTS	
AC Milan 2	(Muntari 9, Robinho 90) Atalanta 0
Catania 0	Bologna 1 (Ramirez 79)
Cesena 0	Udinese 1 (Fabbrini 4)
Florentina 2	(Montolivo 48-pen, 71)
Novara 2	(Jeda 14, Rigoni 30-pen)
Genoa 2	(Palacio 11, Jankovic 76)
Cagliari 1	(Ariauo 13)
Juventus 1	(Marchisio 9) Lecce 1
	(Bertolacci 85)
Lazio 1	(Ledesma 62-pen)
Siena 1	(Destro 26)
Parma 3	(Marques 53, Giovinco 55,

post to squeeze in the ball from a tight angle.

But two goals in two minutes turned the game on its head.

Sebastian Giovinco robbed Lucio and then nutmegged Walter Samuel to set up a tap-in for Jose Marques.

And moments later diminutive striker Giovinco nipped between the two centre-halves to run clear and fire in off the bar.

Former Inter forward Jonathan Biabiany sealed the points late on with the third.

Udinese matched Napoli's points with a 1-0 win at already relegated Cesena, although they trail the southerners on head-to-head record.

Milan enjoyed the lion's share of chances but they had to wait until injury time to wrap up the points through Robinho.

Inter Milan's Champions League hopes took a knock as they lost 3-1 at Parma and now trail Napoli and Udinese by three points in the race for third.

Inter took the lead after just 13 minutes as Dejan Stankovic tried to tee up Diego Milito but his cross was too far in front of the Argentine forward, only for Wesley Sneijder to arrive at the back

Diego to see out contract

AFP, Dubai

Diego Maradona has retracted his threat of walking away from his job as coach of Al Wasl if the UAE side did not recruit new players.

Last month the Argentine football legend declared in the local media: "I recently received a promise from Al Wasl directors to strengthen the club with new quality players.

"This promise must be kept, if not I will leave and return to my country, Argentina."

But a club statement on Thursday confirmed Maradona would see out his contract which runs until the end of next season.

Al Wasl added that Maradona's "outburst had not been in the interests of the club".

Robben stays at Bayern

AFP, Berlin

Arjen Robben has ended speculation about his Bayern Munich future by signing a two-year contract extension that will keep him at the club until June 2015, the Champions League finalists announced on Thursday.

"We're delighted to have extended Arjen's contract until 2015," said Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

Robben, 28, joined Bayern from Real Madrid in 2009.

Cisse sinks Chelsea

AFP, London



Chelsea were left contemplating the prospect of having to win this season's Champions League in order to qualify for next term's edition after a 2-0 defeat by Newcastle on Wednesday.

Newcastle striker Papiss Demba Cisse, one of the signings of the January transfer window, made it 13 goals in 12 games as he struck twice for the visitors at Stamford Bridge.

The result left sixth-placed Chelsea four points adrift of both fourth-placed Tottenham Hotspur, who won 4-1 away to Bolton Wanderers on Wednesday, and Newcastle, who trail Spurs on goal difference alone, with just two Premier League games of the season left.

Usually, the top three clubs in the Premier League qualify for the Champions League proper, with the fourth-placed side entering the preliminary round.

But if Chelsea beat Bayern Munich in the Champions League final at the German club's home ground on May 19, they will take the place that would otherwise go to the team finishing fourth.

Senegal forward Cisse unleashed a powerful shot past Petr Cech to give the Magpies a 19th minute lead.

But in stoppage time at the end of the game Cisse topped that effort with a stunning, swerving shot from wide out on the left for one of the goals of this or any other season.

The loss meant Chelsea, like fellow FA Cup finalists Liverpool, suffered a defeat in their final match before Saturday's show-piece match at Wembley.

Meanwhile Spurs won away from home for the first time in 2012 as they moved to within a point of third-placed north London rivals Arsenal just a day after Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp was overlooked for the England job in favour of Roy Hodgson.

At the Reebok Stadium not even the presence in the stands of Bolton midfielder Fabrice Muamba, making his first visit to the ground since suffering a cardiac arrest when Wanderers played Spurs in an FA Cup tie at White Hart Lane on March 17, could inspire his teammates.

Luka Modric's 25-yard swerving shot put Tottenham in front eight minutes before half-time.

Nigel Reo-Cooker gave Muamba and the Bolton faithful something to cheer with a 51st minute equaliser.

But three goals in nine minutes, including two from Emmanuel Adebayor, turned the tide in Tottenham's favour.

Rafael van der Vaart scored from Gareth Bale's cross on the hour and two minutes later Adebayor made it 3-1.

Bale then turned provider for the unmarked Adebayor, who rounded Bolton keeper Adam Bogdan, before slotting home his second goal and leaves Bolton in the bottom three level with fourth from bottom QPR but with a worse goal difference.

'La Liga win toughest'

REUTERS, Madrid

Jose Mourinho believes winning La Liga was the toughest of the seven league titles he has sealed in coaching stints in his native Portugal, England, Italy and Spain, the Real Madrid manager said on Wednesday.

Mourinho became the first coach to win a domestic league in four different major countries following his two titles in Portugal with Porto, two in England with Chelsea, two in Italy with Inter Milan and now one in Spain with Real.

"It was the most difficult," the 49-year-old said in a television interview.

"Up until the final moment nobody gifted us anything," he added.

Getting the better of Barca, where he was an assistant under Bobby Robson in the late 1990s, will be a particular source of satisfaction for Mourinho, who has made a habit of needing his former employers during his two years in the Spanish capital.

He could not help taking a dig at the Catalans, suggesting one of the penalty's they had been awarded in their 4-1 home win over Malaga earlier on Wednesday was "soft".

'Newcastle harder than United'

AFP, Manchester



Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini has warned his Premier League title-chasers to beware the threat of in-form Newcastle when they travel to the north-east side on Sunday.

City's 1-0 win over reigning champions and title rivals Manchester United in a tense derby at Eastlands on Monday saw them go top of the table on goal difference from their cross-town foes with two games remaining.

"Newcastle will be our hardest game -- harder than United," Mancini insisted. "It is strange but it is like this.

"They have had a fantastic season and are playing to get into the Champions League," the Italian added. "Their manager is one of the best managers here and it will be a tough game.

"It is another Champions League final on

Sunday. We have two -- Newcastle and QPR," said Mancini, aiming to see City crowned champions of England for the first time in 44 years.

"We have to keep a big concentration until May 13."

Mancini maintains United, with games against Swansea and Sunderland, remain the favourites to retain their title.

Despite seeing City lose to both of those sides this season, Mancini has insisted Sir Alex Ferguson's men now face "two easy games".

Mancini said: "We have done nothing yet. We are at the top but we need to win two games.

"We need to play well and we need to score if we want to win. They (United) will get six points.

"We are happy for the crowd but it is important our supporters do not think it is finished. We need to be very calm."



PHOTO: AFP

Newcastle United striker Papiss Cisse is ecstatic after scoring the opening goal against Chelsea during their Premier League encounter at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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