

**Barton set for Marseille**

Queen's Park Rangers midfielder Joey Barton could be set for a season-long loan move to Marseille in exchange for the French Ligue 1 side's Cameroonian midfielder Stephane Mbia, Sky Sports television said on Friday.

Barton's future has been the subject of much debate after the 29-year-old was stripped of the captaincy and given a 12-match ban for his red card and subsequent conduct on the final day of last season against Manchester City.

He spent pre-season training with fourth-tier Fleetwood Town in northwest England but would not be able to join the League Two newboys on loan as it is understood the Football League would refuse to register him while his ban remains.

Ligue 1 club Marseille are reported to be the only club to have expressed an interest in the controversial former Newcastle United player.

The news comes after QPR failed to issue Barton with a squad number for the new season, with Sky Sports reporting that Mbia, 26, could be heading to west London in exchange.

Barton's number was given to summer signing Ryan Nelsen, and the midfielder posted on Twitter: "Heard my shirt numbers gone to someone else. News to me..."

"Just come off the golf course so only just heard. A call would have been nice. Ah, well life goes on..."

Barton signed off with a tweet "Bonne nuit" -- French for "good night" -- on the micro-blogging site on Thursday night.



- (SATURDAY)**  
**STAR Cricket**  
England v South Africa  
Third Test, Day 3  
Live from 4:00pm
- STAR Sports**  
Cincinnati Masters  
Quarterfinals  
Live from 5:30am  
Semifinals  
Live from 2:30am (Sunday)
- English Premiership**  
Arsenal v Sunderland  
Live from 8:00pm
- ESPN**  
English Premiership  
West Bromwich v Liverpool  
Live from 8:00pm  
Newcastle v Tottenham  
Live from 10:30pm
- (SUNDAY)**  
**STAR Cricket**  
ICC U-19 World Cup  
Australia v Bangladesh  
Quarterfinal  
Live from 5:30am
- England v South Africa  
Third Test, Day 4  
Live from 4:00pm
- STAR Sports**  
English Premiership  
Wigan v Chelsea  
Live from 6:30pm  
Man City v Southampton  
Live from 9:00pm
- Primera Liga**  
Real Madrid v Valencia  
Live from 11:30pm  
Barcelona v Real Sociedad  
Live from 1:30am (Monday)
- (MONDAY)**  
**STAR Cricket**  
ICC U-19 World Cup  
Quarterfinals  
Live from 5:30am
- England v South Africa  
Third Test, Day 5  
Live from 4:00pm
- ESPN**  
Sportscentre India  
Sports News  
Live from 8:00pm
- English Premiership**  
Everton v Man United  
Live from 1:00am (Tuesday)
- (TUESDAY)**  
**STAR Cricket**  
ICC U-19 World Cup  
Semifinals  
Live from 5:30am
- ESPN**  
Sportscentre India  
Sports News  
Live from 8:00pm
- (WEDNESDAY)**

**It's not just Messi v Ronaldo**

AFP, Madrid



The Spanish league season kicks-off this weekend with Barcelona star Lionel Messi insisting it is not just a battle between himself and Cristiano Ronaldo.

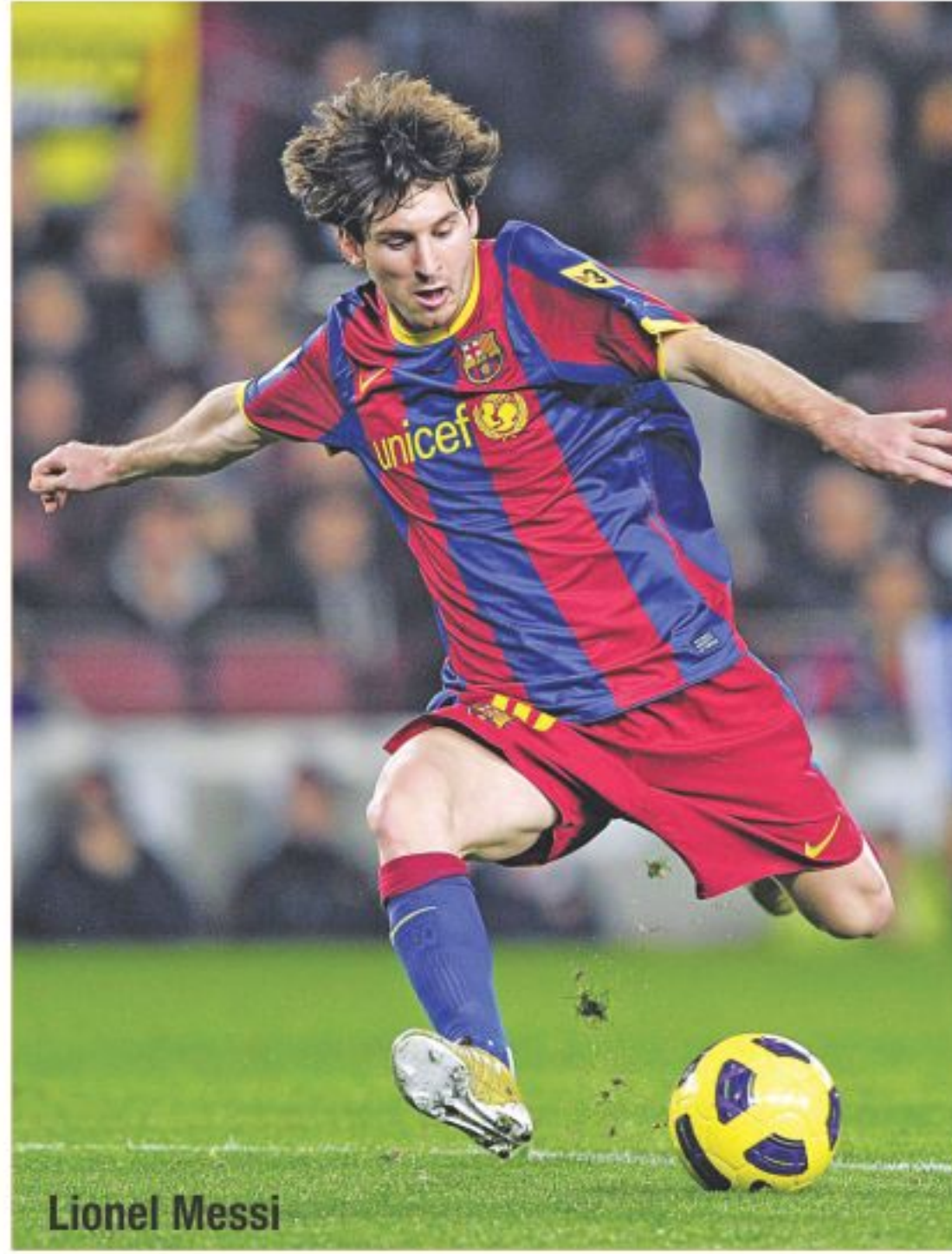
"With Cristiano I have absolutely no problem. All that is said about us is to do with the press who want us to have our own personal battle but I have never competed with him or fought him," said the 25 year-old current holder of the FIFA Ballon d'Or. "I just try to do my job in the best way possible to win trophies for my national team and Barcelona", he continued after scoring in Argentina's 3-1 win over Germany on Wednesday night.

The two players were neck-and-neck in the goalscoring charts last season, with the Argentinian hitting 50 in the league compared to Ronaldo's 46, with an incredible 73 in all competitions for Messi and 60 for the Madrid star.

Madrid finished the season nine points clear of a Barca side that still managed to lift 4 titles in what was to be Pep Guardiola's last season of a hugely



Cristiano Ronaldo



Lionel Messi

successful time for the Catalans.

The two giants kick-off the new campaign on Sunday with home games against Valencia and Real Sociedad, with one eye on their two-legged Spanish Super Cup encounter over the next two weeks.

The first-leg is in the Camp Nou next Thursday before the return game in Madrid 6 days later.

Barca begin a new era under Tito Vilanova, Pep Guardiola's assistant for four seasons, with virtually the same squad as last term.

Spain left-back Jordi Alba is until now the only arrival from Valencia but more may follow.

Barca's Brazilian defender Adriano has seen little

change so far under the new coach.

"Training is the same as we had with Pep and the philosophy is the same, there won't be too many changes," he said.

"Those who think this league is only about two sides are wrong, there are always surprise teams, we have to keep up our own high standards and win what we could not win last season."

Carles Puyol is available for Sunday after a knee injury that kept him out of Euro 2012 and David Villa is almost back from the fractured tibia that saw him sit out most of last season, but he is not expected to be pushed into action immediately.

Madrid have also changed very little a team that brought to an end Guardiola's three consecutive titles with a record 100 points and 121 goals.

Ronaldo will be backed once again by Karim Benzema and Gonzalo Higuain to provide the firepower for Jose Mourinho's team.

Valencia, however, ended last season third for the third successive year and will provide a severe test in Madrid's opening defence of the title.

New coach Mauricio Pellegrino will be able to choose from four new signings, including Mexican Andres Guardado and former Madrid midfielder Fernando Gago.

Forward Roberto Soldado, the highest-scoring Spaniard with 17 goals last season, should shake off a niggling injury in time.

Also on Sunday, Europa League winners Atletico Madrid start their campaign at last season's surprise package Levante, with a growing injury list ahead of next week's UEFA Super Cup tie with Chelsea.

Belgian goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois returned with damaged ribs from international duty and is a doubt, while international full-back Juan Francisco Torres -- "Juanfran" -- twisted a knee in Spain's game in Puerto Rico and is definitely out.

Adrian, Felipe Luis and Diego Costa are also doubtful Atletico.

Athletic Bilbao's build-up to their home game with Betis has not been ideal after a week in which they have come close to losing two star players in Fernando Llorente and Javi Martinez.

First, forward Llorente announced his decision not to sign a contract extension before it was revealed Bayern Munich were willing to pay the 40 million euros (\$49 million, £31 million) required to free Martinez from the Basque side.

Both players trained on their own on Thursday and if they are still at the club by the weekend it is unlikely they will feature.

**Rio fined over tweet**



AFP, London

The Football Association on Friday fined Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand £45,000 (\$70,000, 57,000 euros) for improper conduct over comments he made on Twitter relating to the John Terry racism trial.

Chelsea captain Terry was found not guilty last month of racially abusing QPR defender Anton Ferdinand, Rio's brother, during a Premier League game on October 23 last year, although he is also now contesting a FA charge over the same incident.

During the trial, Ferdinand appeared to endorse a tweet by another user of the micro-blogging website which described Chelsea defender Ashley Cole, who gave evidence on behalf of Terry in the trial, as a "chocice".

The term is understood to mean someone who is black on the outside but white on the inside.

The FA felt Ferdinand's support for the controversial tweet brought the game into disrepute and the 33-year-old was given his

punishment on Friday.

"Manchester United's Rio Ferdinand has been fined £45,000 after an independent regulatory commission found proven a charge of improper conduct in relation to a comment posted on Twitter," an FA statement read.

"The commission decided that the comment was improper and brought the game into disrepute. In addition, the commission found that the breach included a reference to ethnic origin, colour or race."

Cole, who also told the court he was a long-standing friend of the Ferdinand brothers, was accused by one person who sent a tweet to Rio Ferdinand of being a "chocice".

The person wrote: "Looks like Ashley Cole's going to be their choc ice. Then again he's always been a sell out. Shame on him."

Manchester United defender Rio, who has played with Terry at the heart of England's defence, replied: "I hear you fella! Chocice is classic! hahahahahaha!!"

Users began discussing the comments and reacting to them and Ferdinand wrote: "And if I want to laugh at something someone tweets...I will! Hahahahaha! Now stop getting ya knickers in a twist!"

**'Van Persie holds the key'**

AFP, London



Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand has warned champions Manchester City that his side's swoop for Arsenal striker Robin van Persie could tilt the balance of power in the Premier League back to Old Trafford.

With the new Premier League campaign starting on Saturday, United have landed a significant blow before the first ball has even been kicked after Dutch star van Persie decided to snub City in favour of a move to Sir Alex Ferguson's team.

When big-spending City snatched the title in sensational fashion on the final day of last season, scoring twice in stoppage-time to win against QPR, it seemed there had been a changing of the guard in England's top flight.

City, who start their title defence against Southampton at Eastlands on Sunday, had looked favourites to

cement their status as the country's new superpower by signing van Persie.

But Ferguson's powers of persuasion tempted van Persie to United and Ferdinand believes it could prove a defining moment for both clubs.

"The manager has always said to me that the transfer window isn't always about who you bring in but it's as much about shaking up the changing room. And I think that's definitely something that's going to happen this time," Ferdinand said.

"Expectations here are higher than anywhere else in the world, some do brilliantly and some don't fare quite so well. I've got no worries about Robin, though."

"I know his main aim won't be a selfish one, it will be all about winning trophies. And if he can score goals like he did last year then we'll all be smiling come the end of the season."

Van Persie and fellow new signing Shinji Kagawa could both feature in United's starting line-up at Everton as Ferguson's team look to make a strong start after finishing without silverware for the first time since 2005.

Even without van Persie, City are likely to pose the biggest threat to United's hopes of winning a 20th league title.

City boss Roberto Mancini has been frustrated by his club's failure to deliver top-class signings to build on last season's first title for 44 years, but in Carlos Tevez he has a revitalised player capable of causing serious damage to Premier League defences.

**FIXTURES**  
(1400GMT unless stated)

**Saturday**  
Arsenal v Sunderland, Fulham v Norwich, Newcastle v Tottenham (1630GMT), QPR v Swansea, Reading v Stoke, West Brom v Liverpool, West Ham v Aston Villa

**Sunday**  
Man City v Southampton (1500GMT), Wigan v Chelsea (1230GMT)

**Monday**



Argentina legend Diego Maradona (R) presents Wei Di, head of the Chinese Football Association, with an autographed ball during a meeting in Beijing on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

**Maradona sues for \$3.2m**



AFP, Beijing

Argentine football great Diego Maradona attended a Beijing court hearing Friday which was considering his \$3.2 million image rights claim against two Chinese Internet companies, state media said.

Maradona accuses the companies of using his name and picture for an online gaming site without asking his permission, news agency Xinhua said.

A Beijing court heard the case against Beijing Sina Internet Information Service Co Ltd -- operator of one of China's largest internet portals Sina.com -- and Shanghai No. 9 City Information Technology Co Ltd, it said.

A cartoon image of Maradona in

his Argentinian blue and white-striped national team shirt could still be found at the game's website qiuqiu.9c.com, on Friday morning, Xinhua added.

However, it appeared to have been removed later in the day when AFP checked.

Maradona's agent in China, Tang Qinghui, told AFP that she could not comment on the case.

However, sources told Xinhua that the 51-year-old is seeking 20 million yuan (\$3.2 million) in compensation.

Tang said Maradona is in China to discuss with football officials how the game can be developed in the country at grass roots level.

But there has been speculation in the Chinese media that he is being lined up to become coach of the national football team.

The former coach of the Argentina national team and United Arab Emirates club Al Wasl held meetings with top Chinese Football Association officials on Thursday.

"They did not talk about the national coach job," Tang told AFP.

"Maradona just wants to see football in China develop, and to particularly help young footballers."

Tang said Maradona -- who became a hate figure among England fans following his infamous "Hand of God" handball goal at the 1986 World Cup -- will also be giving advice to referees and coaches in China.

CFA spokesman Dong Hua also said that the manager's position was not discussed.

"He met with our vice chairman Wei Di but they did not discuss this matter," he told AFP.

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