

MESSI

heads shortlist

Football

REUTERS, Zurich

Argentina and Barcelona forward Lionel Messi is in line to become the first man to win the World Player of the Year award for the fourth time in a row after the shortlist for FIFA's Ballon d'Or was published on Monday.

The 25-year-old, who took his career tally for club and country to 301 goals on Saturday, was among the 23 players named in the list which includes Real Madrid and Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo, runner-up to Messi in last year's vote.

Andres Iniesta of Barcelona, named the Player of the Tournament after Spain retained their title at Euro 2012 is also included as is Radamel Falcao, who has been in brilliant scoring form all year for Colombia and Atletico Madrid, helping his club win the Europa League last season.

Barca coach Tito Vilanova showered praise on Messi at a news conference on Monday.

"I don't think we'll see a player like him again. Not only for the goals he scores but for the ability he has to read the game," he said before hailing Iniesta.

"He is the clear example of a player trained at the Masia (Barcelona youth academy) who reaches the top. He is another one of those players of a quality that Barca will find it tough to produce again."

Ten men are also named on the shortlist for Coach of the Year Award including Vicente del Bosque, who led Spain to the Euro 2012 title in Ukraine and Poland in July.

Roberto Di Matteo, who took over at Chelsea two months before they won the Champions League in May, is also on the list but there is no place for Frenchman Herve Renard who led Zambia to an unlikely victory in the African Nations Cup in February.

The shortlists will be whittled down to a final selection of three at the end of November with the winners

announced at a globally televised gala ceremony in Zurich on Jan 7 next year.

Players (in alphabetical order): Sergio Agüero (Argentina), Xabi Alonso (Spain), Mario Balotelli (Italy), Karim Benzema (France), Gianluigi Buffon (Italy), Sergio Busquets (Spain), Iker Casillas (Spain), Cristiano Ronaldo (Portugal), Didier Drogba (Ivory Coast), Radamel Falcao (Colombia), Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Sweden), Andres Iniesta (Spain), Lionel Messi (Argentina), Manuel Neuer (Germany), Neymar (Brazil), Mesut Ozil (Germany), Gerard Pique (Spain), Andrea Pirlo (Italy), Sergio Ramos (Spain), Wayne Rooney (England), Yaya Toure (Ivory Coast), Robin van Persie (Netherlands), Xavi (Spain).

Coaches (in alphabetical order): Vicente del Bosque (Spain/Spain national team), Roberto Di Matteo (Italy/Chelsea), Alex Ferguson (Scotland/Manchester United), Pep Guardiola (Spain/Barcelona former coach), Jupp Heynckes (Germany/Bayern Munich), Jurgen Klopp (Germany/Borussia Dortmund), Joachim Low (Germany/Germany national team), Roberto Mancini (Italy/Manchester City), Jose Mourinho (Portugal/Real Madrid), Cesare Prandelli (Italy/Italy national team)



'I'm no ball hog'

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi says he is not a ball hog in an interview published Tuesday, a day after he picked up a Golden Boot award for scoring 50 goals last season.

"I have never considered myself a ball hog, even if others thought so," the 25-year Argentine football wonder said in an interview with Spain's top selling sports daily Marca.

"But I have also taken those opinions into account to try to improve," said Messi, who also heads a 23-strong shortlist for a FIFA/France Football Ballon d'Or award for the world's best footballer of the year.

The Argentine, who has already won the Ballon d'Or three times, is the second-best passer of the ball in the Liga so far this season, with four passes ending in goals, behind only team-mate Cesc Fabregas who made six.

Messi also is the top scorer this season with 13 goals in the Liga, smashing through the 300 goals mark for his career in just 419 matches.

"My playing style has always been the same. I have never looked for it, but it has been like that since I was small," Messi said.

"One thing for sure is that I learned a lot in youth football. Here we work in a different way with the ball and the tactical system. I came from Argentina where we did not do anything like that, everything was about running and not much else."

Messi hailed the recent success of Argentina, who now lead their group in the qualifiers for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil with only one defeat, a 1-0 loss to Venezuela.

"What has changed is the results. Winning gives you a lot of confidence and you work differently."

"Winning the World Cup is the greatest. And if it's in Brazil, even better," he added.

Messi, who will soon be the father of a son, Thiago, had a few words for his offspring's future: "He should be whatever he wants to be. When he grows up he will get to know what he wants and what he chooses will be fine for me, for his mother and for everyone."

Kagawa out of qualifier

AFP, Tokyo

Manchester United midfielder Shinji Kagawa has been ruled out of Japan's World Cup qualifier in Oman on November 14 due to a knee injury he suffered a week ago, the Japan Football Association said Tuesday.

Kagawa was not among the 18 Europe-based players who coach Alberto Zaccheroni planned to call up for his 23-man squad for the Oman game, the association said.

The 23-year-old summer signing was injured in Manchester United's 3-2 Champions League win over Braga on October 23.

FA launches probe

AFP, London

The Football Association on Monday launched an investigation into claims referee Mark Clattenburg used "inappropriate language" towards two Chelsea players during their match with Manchester United on Sunday.

Clattenburg aggrieved Chelsea by sending off two of their players and allowing an offside United goal to stand in the European champions' 3-2 defeat at Stamford Bridge.

British newspaper reports on Monday claimed the language used by Clattenburg included a racial insult directed towards Chelsea's Nigerian midfielder John Obi Mikel.

The other player involved is reported to be Spanish midfielder Juan Mata.

Chelsea made an official complaint to the Premier League match delegate, whose report was due to be transferred to the FA on Monday.

"The FA has begun an investigation relating to allegations made following Sunday's fixture at Stamford Bridge between Chelsea and Manchester United," read a statement from the FA.

Mark in hot water

AFP, London



London's Metropolitan Police have confirmed that they have received a complaint about allegedly racist comments made by a top flight referee during last weekend's match between Chelsea and Manchester United.

Scotland Yard said in a statement that the complaint was made on Monday afternoon and was being considered, while officers had been in touch with the west London club about the claims against Mark Clattenburg.

"We will work in partnership with Chelsea Football Club and the Football Association in order to consider any allegation that is made in relation to the reported events," the statement added.

Clattenburg is alleged to have used "inappropriate language", reportedly of a racist nature, towards Chelsea's Nigerian and Spanish players John Mikel Obi and Juan Mata at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

The 37-year-old official, who has vowed to co-operate fully with any probe, has been stood down from

matches for a week, pending an FA investigation.

The racism claims are the latest to hit the English Premier League, notably after Chelsea captain and former England skipper John Terry was cleared earlier this year in a criminal trial of racially abusing QPR's Anton Ferdinand.

Terry was later found guilty at an FA disciplinary hearing and banned for four matches. Racism is still a source of friction among some black players, who say that the game is still affected by it, despite efforts to stamp it out.

The head of the Society of Black Lawyers, Peter Herbert, on Monday said the organisation had written to the police to request an investigation into Clattenburg's alleged comments.

"Our information is that racist remarks were directed at John Mikel Obi and at Juan Mata. If so, that is wholly unacceptable in any circumstances," the letter stated.

"Although this matter may be investigated by the FA, it is appropriate that the MPS (Metropolitan Police Service) independently see if a racially-aggravated offence has occurred."



Chelsea midfielder John Obi Mikel (R) talks with referee Mark Clattenburg during their Premier League match against Manchester United at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Badstuber out for two weeks

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich defender Holger Badstuber will be out for at least two weeks after tearing a thigh muscle in Sunday's 2-1 defeat by Bayer Leverkusen, the Bundesliga leaders said on Monday.

Germany international Badstuber is certain to miss Wednesday's German Cup second round match against Kaiserslautern as well as Saturday's league game at Hamburg SV and their Champions League encounter with France's Lille on November 7.

"This is a big setback for us. I hope we can adequately replace him for this period," Bayern coach Jupp Heynckes told reporters.

The Bavarians could also be without Franck Ribery on Wednesday.

Ref sends off 17

Football

REUTERS, Montevideo

A 3-3 draw between Wanderers and Juventud in the Uruguayan first division ended in chaos as the referee, who had already sent off one player, brandished 16 more red cards when fighting broke out after the final whistle.

Tempers became frayed when Wanderers believed they should have been awarded a penalty for a foul on midfielder Gaston Rodriguez near the end of Sunday's encounter in Montevideo, according to media reports.

Punching and kicking ensued among the two teams after the final whistle and the referee, Leodan Gonzalez, red carded eight players from each team.

As violence broke out on the pitch, the trouble spread to the stands at Parque Viera where a fan suffered a cut to the head after being hit by a stone.

The total sent off was 17 after Wanderers had midfielder Diego de Souza dismissed at the end of the first half.

During play, a team can have no more than four players sent off before the match is abandoned.

Juventud president Yamandu Costa said the club's board were looking at sanctioning the team's players who took part in the fighting, Uruguayan daily El Pais reported on Monday.

Wanderers vice-president Gaston Inda said: "Something got out of hand because during the match nothing had happened, but these are situations we can't allow and we're sorry for what happened."

Racism has returned

AFP, London



Racism, a problem that English football thought it had solved, has returned to haunt the country that gave birth to the game, with the

Premier League's global popularity on the line after a succession of scandals.

With Luis Suarez and John Terry having already earned bans for racist abuse, the issue lurched into new territory on Sunday when top flight referee Mark Clattenburg was accused of racially abusing Chelsea's John Mikel Obi.

It came after a match between Chelsea and Manchester United that had been a memorable encounter, full of incident and intrigue, but when the accusations against Clattenburg emerged a few hours later, the mood soured.

The seriousness of the claims was not lost on commentators on Monday.

"If a match official has used racial insults or language to a player, then he's for the high jump," former Premier League referee Jeff Winter told BBC radio. "It'd probably be the end of his career, if proven."

The allegations are being seen as all the more shocking because English football was supposed to have banished the monkey chants and banana-throwing of the 1970s and 1980s during the period of aggressive gentrification heralded by the launch of the Premier League in 1992, as ticket prices and television exposure soared.

England came to be seen as a safe haven for black footballers and by 2002, Arsenal were fielding teams containing as

many as nine black or mixed race players.

When English teams have found themselves the target of racial abuse, it has been portrayed in the national media as a problem that now belongs to other parts of the world.

After footage emerged of England's Danny Rose being taunted with monkey noises by fans during an under-21 match in Serbia earlier this month, the shock reflected the fact that such scenes have not been witnessed in England for decades.

When Uruguayan striker Suarez was accused of racially abusing United's Patrice Evra last season, meanwhile, it was held that he was simply unprepared for the sensitivities of life in a multi-cultural society.

The Suarez case, though, proved to be the tip of the iceberg.

The Liverpool striker was banned for eight matches but it was followed by the Terry-Anton Ferdinand affair, several accusations of racial abuse by fans towards players on social media, and now the claim that Clattenburg used a racist insult against Nigerian midfielder Mikel at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

But if racism now seems to be back on the agenda in English football, John Barnes -- a target of the banana-throwers of the 1980s -- says that it never went away.

"It's very easy to call it social injustice when it affects us -- with Danny Rose, with Anton, with Luis Suarez -- but what about the social injustices that go on for black people every day?" the former Liverpool winger asked talkSPORT radio last week.

Rovers eye Harry or Diego

AFP, London

Blackburn Rovers are eyeing Harry Redknapp and Diego Maradona to take over from Steve Kean in the manager's chair, after he quit his post last month, a number of British newspapers claimed on Tuesday.

Former Tottenham boss Redknapp, 65, has most frequently been linked to the vacant position at Ewood Park and was said to be meeting officials at the second-tier Championship side, the reports said.

Argentina legend Maradona, though, has also been evoked as a possible successor to Kean, after his departure from United Arab Emirates club Al Wasl.

Indian-owned Blackburn's recruitment chief Shebby Singh is said to favour 52-year-old Maradona's appointment while executive director Derek Shaw is said to prefer Redknapp.

An announcement is expected this week.

Kean was appointed after Blackburn was taken over by Indian poultry giant Venky's and sacked popular manager Sam Allardyce, outraging fans.

His successor's 21-month reign was dogged by resentment among supporters, particularly after relegation from the top flight English Premier League. He resigned in September, describing his position as "untenable".



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