

Another feather in Messi's cap

AFP, Barcelona

Lionel Messi's goal that brought Barcelona level with Paris Saint-Germain in Wednesday's Champions League Group F encounter saw him equal the record mark for most goals in all European competitions.

The Argentine now has 76 European goals, putting him level with former Real Madrid star Raul, with Cristiano Ronaldo one behind.

Messi needed just 95 European appearances to reach the landmark. All but one of those goals have come in the Champions League.

The 27-year-old is already the all-time leading scorer in the history of La Liga, the European Cup/Champions League and the Clasico, as well as being Barcelona's all-time top marksman.

2nd Pak-Kiwi ODI today

AFP, Sharjah

New Zealand captain Kane Williamson said his team had the capacity to bounce back against Pakistan in the second one-day international in Sharjah on Friday.

Pakistan overcame early batting jitters in the first one-day to win by three wickets in Dubai on Monday for a 1-0 lead in the five-match series.

But Williamson, leading the side in the absence of regular captain Brendon McCullum who left for home to prepare for the series against Sri Lanka, hoped his team learn from mistakes made in the first game.

"It's important to bounce back," said Williamson on Thursday. "We have done that in the past and in the Test and Twenty20 series on this tour."

New Zealand staged a remarkable comeback to level the three-match Test series 1-1 after losing the first game and drawing the second and also had a come from behind parity in the two-match Twenty20 series.



Manchester City midfielder Samir Nasri is ecstatic after scoring the opening goal against Roma during their Champions League encounter at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Nasri takes City into last 16

AFP, Paris



A memorable 50th appearance in the Champions League for Samir Nasri helped Manchester City into the last 16 on Wednesday night, while a Neymar stunner set Barcelona on the way to topping their group.

Nasri's first goal of the season -- also his 50th for an English club -- and an assist for Pablo Zabaleta secured a 2-0 win for City away against Roma and saw them qualify for the knockout stage at the expense of the Italian side in Wednesday's final round of group games.

Meanwhile, Group E winners Bayern Munich's 3-0 victory at home to CSKA Moscow gave Roma the consolation of a spot in the Europa League.

Neymar's superb goal -- a curling right-footed effort from outside the area before half-time -- put Barcelona into the lead against Paris Saint-Germain in a game the Catalans had to win to pip their opponents to top spot in Group F.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic had given PSG the

lead, but Lionel Messi equalised and, after Neymar paved the way to victory, Luis Suarez added a third -- his first at the Camp Nou since his move from Liverpool -- in the second half.

Barca's victory means they can surely now expect an easier tie when the draw is made on Monday, while the result ended PSG's record of being the only unbeaten side left in the major European leagues this season.

Germany's Schalke 04 were the other qualifiers on the night, their 1-0 win away at Maribor thanks to 19-year-old Max Meyer's 62nd-minute goal, sealing their place as rivals Sporting Lisbon went down 3-1 against Group G winners Chelsea.

Schalke's qualification makes it the second successive season that all four German representatives have made it through to the last 16, Borussia Dortmund and Bayer Leverkusen also having progressed.

Manchester City made light of missing three key players -- leading scorer Sergio Agüero and captain Vincent Kompany

were injured while Yaya Toure was suspended -- as the mercurial Nasri showed his positive side.

Nasri's goal was worthy of his 50th appearance in the competition, as he created space for himself and cracked in a stunning right-footed effort from just outside the box that beat Morgan de Sanctis, hit the post, and went into the net on the hour mark.

Nasri then turned creator with just under five minutes remaining as his pass set up Pablo Zabaleta for a well-taken second City goal and the Argentinian's first ever in the competition.

City manager Manuel Pellegrini, who has guided them to six successive wins, was delighted with the manner in which his players had handled the pressure.

"I had a lot of trust in what we could do," said the Chilean.

"I said I didn't want to talk about players not in the team. This team deserve a little more credit than the press always give us."

Despite Ibrahimovic's early goal -- his first against the club he spent a season with in 2009/10 -- Barcelona were worthy of

RESULTS

Roma (ITA) 0 **Manchester city (ENG) 2** (Nasri 60, Zabaleta 86)
Bayern Munich (GER) 3 (Mueller 18-pen, Rode 84, Goetze 90) CSKA Moscow (RUS) 0
Barcelona (ESP) 3 (Messi 19, Neymar 42, Suarez 77) Paris Saint-Germain (FRA) 1 (Ibrahimovic 15)
Ajax (NED) 4 (Schoene 45+1-pen, 50, Klaassen 53, Milik 74) APOEL (CYP) 0
Chelsea (ENG) 3 (Fabregas 8-pen, Schuerrle 16, Mikel 56) Sporting (POR) 1 (Silva 50)
Maribor (SLO) 0 **Schalke 04 (GER) 1** (Meyer 62)
FC Porto (POR) 1 (Aboubakar 87) Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 1 (Stepanenko 50)
Athletic Bilbao (ESP) 2 (San Jose 47, Susaeta 88) 2 BATE

their victory and Messi managed to mark the occasion with another landmark goal to bring the sides level.

The score same him equal the record mark for most goals in all European competitions. The Argentine now has 76 European goals, putting him level with former Real Madrid star Raul, with Cristiano Ronaldo one behind.

Real seek perfect 20

AFP, Madrid



La Liga leaders Real Madrid will look to make it 20 consecutive victories in all competitions as they travel to managerless Almeria on Friday for their final league outing of the year.

The European champions head off to Morocco next week to contest the Club World Cup and will be keen to keep their fine run going into 2015.

After downing Celta Vigo last weekend, a comfortable 4-0 victory over Ludogorets Razgrad in midweek saw Los Blancos beat the previous Spanish record of 18, a figure set by Barcelona in the 2005/06 season.

Real became only the sixth side to go through the group stage with a clean sweep of victories in the Champions League -- they are the only side to do it twice -- and their fine form is delighting boss Carlo Ancelotti.

"It is a result we have achieved with extraordinary seriousness and an incredible amount of professionalism," the Italian said of his side's run.

"It is not easy preparing for each game with the same levels of motivation and eagerness that these players are showing. I know that I have an extraordinary group of players."

Cristiano Ronaldo scored his 28th goal of the season and his 72nd overall in the Champions League on Tuesday and will look to continue his lethal form in front of goal as they visit an Almeria side who have not won in the

league since September.

Monday's 5-2 thrashing at the hands of Eibar finally cost Francisco Rodriguez his job with the Andalusians only above the relegation zone on goal difference.

Ronaldo, Gareth Bale, Isco and Toni Kroos were the only first team regulars not handed the night off by Ancelotti in midweek, so the likes of Iker Casillas, Sergio Ramos and Karim Benzema are set to return.

James Rodriguez will be missing, though, as the World Cup's top goalscorer joins fellow midfielders Luka Modric and Sami Khedira on the sidelines after picking up a calf injury against Celta last weekend that is likely to see him miss the rest of the year.

Should Madrid continue their irresistible form, the pressure will be on Barcelona when they visit Getafe on Saturday looking to remain within two points off the league leaders.

The Catalan outfit -- who got a great boost with a fine 3-1 win over Paris Saint Germain in their Champions League clash on Wednesday to finish top of the group -- needed more magic

FIXTURES

(all times GMT)

Friday
Almeria v Real Madrid (1945)

Saturday
Getafe v Barcelona (1500), Valencia v Rayo Vallecano (1700), Cordoba v Levante (1900), Malaga v Celta Vigo (2100)

Sunday
Espanyol v Granada (1100), Sevilla v Eibar (1500), Atletico Madrid v Villarreal (1700), Real Sociedad v

from Lionel Messi to dig them out of a tricky situation after Espanyol struck first in the Catalan derby last weekend.

As ever, the Argentine delivered with his third hat-trick in his last five outings to inspire a 5-1 victory and stretch Barca's winning streak in the league to four games after back-to-back defeats rocked their title hopes in October.

Champions Atletico Madrid will also try to remain in the title hunt when they host Villarreal on Sunday.

However, attention will be on the stands in the first game at the Vicente Calderon since a Deportivo La Coruna fan was killed close to their ground prior to the match between the two sides on November 30.

Atletico have tried to distance themselves from the Frente Atletico ultras group that has been implicated in the fighting that provoked Francisco Jose Romero Taboada's death, yet it remains to be seen if the club will close the section where they are normally located, or distribute tickets to other fans.

The Spanish football league has clamped down on abusive chanting in the wake of the incidents a fortnight ago with Real Madrid, Barcelona, Rayo Vallecano, Deportivo and Granada all set to face fines.

Meanwhile, David Moyes has the chance to bounce back from his side's humiliating 4-0 defeat at Villarreal last weekend, which the Scot admitted could even have been "much worse," in the biggest game of his reign to date when they host Athletic Bilbao in the Basque derby.

Asprilla flees Colombian home

AFP, Bogota

Colombian former football star Faustino "Tino" Asprilla says he has fled his home city in fear of his life after receiving death threats and extortion demands from a criminal gang.

Police were Wednesday investigating the threats that forced Asprilla, a striker who played in the 1994 and 1998 World Cups, out of Tulua, in western Colombia.

Asprilla, 45, whose career included stints in Italy and England and who once hit a hat-trick against Barcelona while playing for Newcastle United in the Champions League, called it "one of the saddest days of my life."

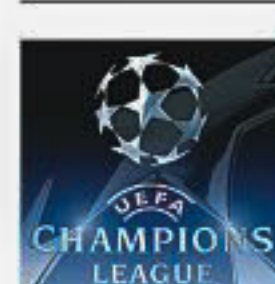
"My family was threatened before me, my father, my sisters," Asprilla said. "I dedicated my life to representing my country abroad, to giving happiness to my Colombian people."

"When I settled down to rest, to recover the time lost with my family, I'm forced to leave by the back door of my own town."

Masked men reportedly entered Asprilla's home Tuesday demanding money and saying they would kill him and his family if they didn't pay up.

'I like swimming with sharks'

AFP, London



Jose Mourinho insists Chelsea will show no fear when they dive into the shark infested waters of the Champions League last 16.

Mourinho's side got back on track with a 3-1 win over Sporting Lisbon in their Group G finale at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday to erase the bitter taste of their first defeat of the season at Newcastle last weekend.

As group winners, the Blues will be pitted against one of big-spending French club Paris Saint Germain, Italian champions Juventus, Swiss side Basel, Germany's Bayer Leverkusen or Shakhtar Donetsk of the Ukraine in Monday's draw for the knockout stages of Europe's elite club competition.

Mourinho knows taking on PSG or Juventus would be a tough test for the Premier League leaders, while the Blues boss is also well aware of the qualities of Basel, who knocked out Liverpool this season and beat Chelsea twice in the group stages last term.

But there was no chance of a feisty competitor like Mourinho voicing any concerns about the dangers lying in wait for his team as they try to improve on last season's semi-final exit.

Asked how he felt about the impending draw, Mourinho produced a typically memorable response as he suggested he would have no problem taking on Zlatan Ibrahimovic and the rest of the expensively assembled Paris squad.

"I like swimming with sharks -- in a cage! I did it in French Polynesia. I didn't want to do it, but my wife and kids pushed me," he said.

"The draw is the draw. We have five possible opponents.

"I think Paris would be good because it is

PSG fans knifed

AFP, Barcelona

Two Paris Saint-Germain supporters suffered knife wounds in two separate incidents following the French side's Champions League match on Wednesday against Barcelona in the Spanish city, police said.

The two victims, whose lives were not in danger, were taken to hospital for treatment, a police spokesman said, adding that the identity of their attackers was not known. One of the two victims remained in hospital.

The attacks come less than two weeks after a Deportivo fan was killed after being beaten and pushed into a river during clashes outside Atletico Madrid's Vicente Calderon stadium before a La Liga match between the two sides.

The Spanish government sacked the security heads of the two clubs after the death and Spain's Football Federation and the government-controlled Higher Sports Council have said tougher sanctions for clubs over violent behaviour by supporters will come into force on December 15.

Kenya cricket team arrives in Pakistan

AFP, Lahore

The Kenyan cricket team arrived in Lahore amid tight security on Wednesday, becoming the first non-Asian visitors to militancy wracked Pakistan for more than five years.

Kenya, who reached the World Cup semifinals in 2003 but have since failed to emerge as a top-flight cricketing nation, are set to play five matches against a second-string Pakistani team.

International tours to Pakistan have been suspended since militants attacked the Sri Lankan team bus in Lahore in March 2009, killing eight people and injuring seven visiting players.

Only neighbouring Afghanistan, which is facing its own Taliban insurgency, has visited the country in the interim, playing a short one-day series in 2011 and a Twenty20 against second-string team Pakistan A last month.



much sterner from now on.

"I don't think any of the big teams are out of the Champions League. Maybe Liverpool. But all the teams that want to win the competition are there and season after season it is the same," he said.

"I used to say that the real Champions League starts now. Barcelona are there, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Then Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester City and Dortmund are all there as well.

"What can we do? I don't know. Last season we were not one of the top four teams in Europe for sure but we made the semifinals. Lets go step by step and see how we do."