

TROUBLE FROM ABOVE

Karim Benzema is likely to face trouble upon his return to Real Madrid after the winter break, having been photographed skydiving in Dubai. Benzema is barred from participating in "dangerous activities" as per his Madrid contract, with skydiving definitely falling into that category. It is thought that the French striker is likely to be fined, though he may even be dropped as



Gerrard fires Liverpool

AFP, London



Steven Gerrard illustrated his importance to Liverpool with two goals as his side avoided FA Cup third-round embarrassment by winning 2-1 at fourth-tier AFC Wimbledon on Monday.

Playing in his first game since announcing that he will leave Liverpool at the end of the season, Gerrard put the visitors ahead with a 12th-minute header at the 4,850-capacity Kingsmeadow stadium in south-west London.

Wimbledon's man-mountain centre-forward Adebayo Akinfenwa, a Liverpool fan, stabbed home a 36th-minute equaliser, but Gerrard netted a fine free-kick in the second half to earn Brendan Rodgers's side a home tie with Bolton Wanderers in round four.

Gerrard's strike prevented Neil Ardley's hosts from emulating the original Wimbledon's famous 1-0 victory over Liverpool in the 1988 FA Cup final, when Lawrie Sanchez scored the only goal and Dave Beasant saved a penalty from John Aldridge.

But despite defeat, the night proved a triumph for the club, which was formed by supporters in 2002 after Wimbledon were moved 56 miles (90 kilometres) north to Milton Keynes and rebranded as Milton Keynes Dons after failing to find a new ground in the local area.

Having started life in the ninth tier of the English league system, AFC Wimbledon have been promoted five times in the last nine years and were appearing in the third round for the first time.

Although Liverpool manager Rodgers named a strong team, showing only four changes to the side that drew 2-2 with Leicester City on New Year's Day, it was the hosts who threatened first, with Sean Rigg running onto Matt Tubbs's flick-on and dragging a shot across goal.

But it was Liverpool who took the lead, with captain Gerrard spraying a pass wide to right wing-back Javi Manquillo before steaming into the box to meet the Spaniard's cross with a stooping header.



Liverpool midfielder Steven Gerrard (2nd from L) celebrates his opening goal with teammates during their FA Cup third round match against Wimbledon at the Cherry Red Records Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Siddikur on top

SPORTS REPORTER

Country's premier golfer Siddikur Rahman bounced back to top the leaderboard of the Summit Open at the close of second day at the Kurmitola Golf Club yesterday.

Siddikur, who played two-under-par on the first day to finish fifth, put up a brilliant performance to play a seven-under-par 63 on the second day to finish top of the leaderboard with an overall nine-under-par 131.

The winner of Asian tour, who played eight birdies and one bogey in the second round, hopes to keep his lead in the third and final day today.

Dulal Hossain with four-under-par and Jamal Hossain Bhuiya with two-under-par were in the second and third positions respectively.

Ireland name 15 for WC

AFP, Dublin

Ireland's 15-man squad for the World Cup, to be played in Australia and New Zealand from February 14 to March 29, announced on Monday.

SQUAD
 William Porterfield (captain), Andrew Balbirnie, Peter Chase, Alex Cusack, George Dockrell, Ed Joyce, Andrew McBrine, John Mooney, Tim Murtagh, Kevin O'Brien, Niall O'Brien, Paul Stirling, Stuart Thompson, Gary Wilson, Craig Young.

Petersen retires

AFP, Cape Town

South African Test opening batsman Alviro Petersen announced his retirement from international cricket after the third Test against the West Indies on Tuesday.

Petersen, 34, scored 2093 runs in 36 Tests at an average of 34.88.

He hit five centuries and eight half-centuries, with a highest score of 182 against England in Leeds in 2012. He also played in 21 one-day internationals and two Twenty20 internationals.

Messi set to leave?

AGENCIES



Messi yesterday began to follow Chelsea FC on twitter, after rumours of unrest at the Nou Camp.

The sacking of sporting director Andoni Zubizarreta and the consequent resignation of Carlos Puyol have painted the picture of an unhappy atmosphere at the Nou Camp.

Further fuelling speculation of Messi's impending move away from the Camp Nou is the fact that he missed Monday's training session with an upset stomach, a day after he started the game against Real Sociedad on the bench, where he and Neymar were spotted by cameras joking around when Barcelona conceded the first goal only a minute into the match.

Messi is said to be very unhappy with the direction the club has taken under new coach Luis Enrique and the board giving the manager their full support has only strained Messi's relationship with Barcelona further. Late last year Messi was quoted in an interview as saying that while he was happy at Barcelona, he did not know what the future held for him, which makes it seem that a move away from the Nou Camp is not as unlikely as it appears.

Also with the transfer ban and Barca's shady dealings coming to light, coupled with the problems Messi is facing in Spanish court, a move away would certainly keep his image from being further tarnished.

Cesc Fabregas stoked the fire last month when talking about rumours of Messi to Chelsea saying, "I'd love that to happen. I'd be all for it."

Messi and Fabregas have been good friends and their respective partners are also known to be very close to each other.

The biggest question surrounding this saga would be the transfer fee involved, especially with FFP coming into play, but it is being speculated that Chelsea will be aided by their sponsors Adidas and Turkish Airlines.

Messi is Adidas's star and the fact that he plays for Barcelona, a club sponsored by Nike, has long been known to displease Adidas. So they would love to bring Messi to an Adidas-sponsored team, and Chelsea fits the bill.

The added revenue Chelsea would generate from shirt sales and image rights of Messi would also go a long way to making up their initial cost, similar to what happened when they bought Fernando Torres for 50 million pounds, only to make up 30 million in the following month via selling shirts and other assorted income. With Messi, this figure would see a significant rise.

Messi's buyout clause is set at 250 million Euros. While a club outside Spain cannot activate the buyout clause, there have been instances where a club outside Spain has given a player enough money to buy out his contract based on a pending agreement to sign with their own club.

Prince Ali to challenge Blatter

AFP, Amman

FIFA Vice-President Prince Ali bin Al Hussein of Jordan said on Tuesday he would stand against incumbent Sepp Blatter for the presidency of world football's governing body later this year.

"I am seeking the presidency of FIFA because I believe it is time to shift the focus away from administrative controversy and back to sport," Prince Ali said on his official Twitter feed.

Prince Ali, who was elected FIFA vice-president for Asia in 2011, said he had been encouraged to stand after discussing the forthcoming election with colleagues in the sport.

"This was not an easy decision. It came after careful consideration and many discussions with respected FIFA colleagues over the last few months," he said.

"The message I heard, over and over, was that it is time for a change."

Anderson steals the show

AFP, Rome



Brazilian Felipe Anderson was the star of the show as Lazio beat Sampdoria 3-0 in Rome on Monday.

The 21-year-old scored one and set up the other two goals as Lazio took sole possession of third place in the Serie A table, behind only champions Juventus and hated local rivals Roma.

They had started the day level on points with Napoli and Sampdoria but Anderson's sterling performance changed all that.

Having taken his time to settle at the start of the season, the Brazilian netted twice in a 2-2 draw with Inter Milan just before the winter mid-season break.

And he carried on from where he left off in the first game of 2015.

"I'm playing consistently, the players and gaffer trust me and I managed to give the best of myself," Anderson told Sky Sport.

Two blistering turns of speed at the end of the first half tipped the scales in Lazio's favour, with Anderson first setting up Marco Parolo for the 38th-minute opener and then doubling the advantage on his own three minutes later.

Another burst down the right midway through the second period saw Anderson create the killer third for Filip Djordjevic.

"We're developing into a good team, we're working with serenity because we know what we're worth. But we must keep our feet on the ground," added Anderson.

Lazio will be hoping there is more of the same from the former Santos player on Sunday in the Rome derby.

Roma travel to Udinese on Tuesday while leaders Juventus tackle Inter Milan in Turin in the 'derby of Italy'.

Diego picks Neuer for Ballon D'Or

AFP, Havana

Argentina legend Diego Maradona said on Monday that he believes Germany goalkeeper Manuel Neuer should pip Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi to the Ballon D'Or.

"Neither Messi, nor Ronaldo, my favourite is Neuer, he's the one who deserves it the most," said the outspoken former star player and coach during a visit to Cuba.

Maradona arrived in the island nation on Monday to take part in some sports programmes with Venezuelan television station Telesur.

But before that, speaking to Radio Habana Cuba, he said "Ronaldo and Messi were resting" during the last year while Neuer was winning the World Cup with Germany.

Title-holder and twice winner Ronaldo, four-time winner Messi and Neuer have been picked for the final shortlist to win the Ballon D'Or.

It will be presented during an awards ceremony in Zurich on January 12.

Agüero back in training

REUTERS, London

Manchester City striker Sergio Agüero has returned to training following a knee ligament injury, the Argentine international said on Monday.

The 26-year-old Argentine, who has scored 19 goals in all competitions for City this season, has not played since the start of December when he limped off against Everton.

"I wanted you to know I've already started field work. Slowly but surely I'll be back at the right moment," Agüero said on Twitter. "Thanks for the wishes!"

Agüero is unlikely to feature for joint-leaders City against Everton at Goodison Park on Saturday, but could make his return against Arsenal at the Etihad Stadium on January 18.

Barcelona in turmoil

Zubizarreta sacked, Puyol quits

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona had a turbulent start to 2015 as the La Liga giants, still reeling over a transfer ban, on Monday sacked sports director Andoni Zubizarreta

while his assistant Carles Puyol resigned.

The club did not say why they fired Zubizarreta, Barcelona's goalkeeper from 1986 to 1994 who played 126 times for Spain and who took up the post in 2010, and didn't name a replacement.

But last year they won no major silverware and Zubizarreta had come under fire for failing to effectively strengthen Barcelona's defence over the summer.

The Blaugrana signed Brazilian right-back Douglas Pereira from Sao Paulo in August but he has failed to force his way into the starting line-up, beginning only



ANDONI ZUBIZARRETA

one league match.

Belgian defender Thomas Vermaelen, signed in August from Premier League side Arsenal, underwent surgery last month on his troublesome right hamstring and will be sidelined for four months.

The club can only sign new players in January 2016 after the Switzerland-based Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) on December 30 dismissed a



CARLES PUYOL

Barcelona appeal against the FIFA ban imposed in April for breaching rules on signing players aged under 18.

The decision means Barcelona cannot buy players during the current January transfer window, nor for the summer transfer period before the 2015-16 season.

Just an hour after the club announced it had parted ways with Zubizarreta, former Barcelona

captain Carles Puyol said he was leaving his position in the Spanish giant's management team.

Puyol, 36, had been Zubizarreta's assistant since May when he retired after 15 seasons at the heart of the Barcelona defence.

"I now want to experience other things from another perspective and from elsewhere," he wrote on Facebook.

"I hope to grow both personally and professionally so that, in the future, I can return to this house and give back everything that you have undoubtedly given me during these unforgettable years," he added.

Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu will appear at a press conference on Wednesday to explain the club's decision to fire Zubizarreta while the club's board met on Monday night to discuss the transfer ban it has been slapped with.

The club has said they "totally disagree" with the sanction which they called "disproportionate" and "excessive".