

LAUDRUP'S MIRACLE

21 years ago on January 8, Michael Laudrup inspired Barcelona to a 5-0 win against Real Madrid. After being sold at the end of the season to Real, Laudrup returned exactly one year later and helped Real reverse the 5-0 scoreline against their bitter rivals



Neuer voted best keeper

IFFHS.COM



Germany's World Cup gold medallist Manuel Neuer has retained his crown with another runaway victory as "The World's Best Goalkeeper" for 2014. The voting, compiled by editorial staff and experts from 60 countries chosen from all the football continents, was part of the 28th running of the IFFHS annual elections.

After the reign of Iker Casillas (five consecutive titles from 2008 to 2012), it was not a surprise to see the beginning of the reign of Neuer, the keeper for Bundesliga Club FC Bayern München and the German National Team. A clear winner in 2013 with a margin of more than 100 points, his performances were even more impressive in 2014 with a demoralising 120 points advantage to claim the Top Goalkeeper Award.

Neuer, who is 28, was in the German national team which defeated Argentina to win the World Cup in Brazil and completed the double with his club FC Bayern.

Behind him came Thibaut Courtois, the young keeper of Atlético de Madrid / FC Chelsea and the Belgium National Team.

The third place was earned by Keylor Navas, the keeper of Costa Rica. Gianluigi Buffon took 4th place, just ahead of World Cup stars Claudio Bravo, Sergio Romero and Guillermo Ochoa.



Atletico Madrid players celebrate their first goal, scored by Raul Garcia from the spot, as the Real players bow their heads in anguish.

PHOTO: AFP

Inter grab Shaqiri

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan have signed Swiss midfielder Xherdan Shaqiri on a six-month loan deal from Bayern Munich, with the option to buy, the Serie A club announced on Thursday.

Inter have reportedly agreed to pay two million euros (\$2.3m) for the 23-year-old winger with an option to buy him outright for EUR14 million (\$16.5m) in June.

"Complete agreement between Inter Milan and Bayern Munich on the arrival of @xs_11official (Xherdan Shaqiri) at the +nerazzurro+, all that is missing is the signature," the former European champions tweeted.

He becomes the second mid-season recruit for Inter after the recent arrival of German striker Lukas Podolski from Arsenal.

Germany top new rankings

AFP, Paris

World champions Germany comfortably top the year-opening FIFA national team rankings released Thursday despite a slight slump since their rampant World Cup showing.

The top three remain unchanged since September with Lionel Messi's beaten World Cup finalists Argentina second and Colombia in third.

Up-and-coming Belgium are fourth ahead of their northern neighbours the Netherlands while humiliated World Cup hosts Brazil open the year in a respectable sixth.

FIFA STANDINGS

1. Germany
2. Argentina
3. Colombia
4. Belgium
5. Netherlands
6. Brazil
8. France
7. Portugal
9. Spain

City close to Bony

AFP, London

Wilfried Bony edged closer to a reported £30 million transfer from Swansea City to Premier League champions Manchester City on Wednesday with his representatives expecting completion "in the next few days".

His agent, Francis Kacou, said Wednesday: "Things will be sorted in the next few days."

Bony said he was looking forward to featuring in the Champions League knock-out rounds for Manuel Pellegrini's team.

"Every player wants to play Champions League, World Cups. It is the wish of every player," Bony told Sky Sports.

"When you get the opportunity... sometimes good ones, sometimes not, but I am just taking it step by step. I am focusing on my national team and want to see the news like you."

Australia ready for challenge

AFP, Melbourne



Australia will launch their attempt to reach new heights in football by toppling champions Japan and winning their first Asian Cup when they kick off the tournament on Friday.

A sell-out crowd is expected at the 30,000-capacity Melbourne Rectangular Stadium as Ange Postecoglou's men take on Kuwait on day one of the 16-nation extravaganza.

An eventual victory for Australia would put the country on top at both club and international level.

Four-time winners Japan are one of their main rivals, despite a match-fixing case swirling around their coach, and Carlos Queiroz's Iran also look like top contenders.

South Korea are looking to end a 55-year title drought, but the draw has been unkind to 2011 semi-finalists Uzbekistan who are likely to face the Koreans or Australia if they reach the quarter-finals.

Among the minnows, Palestine have qualified for the first time, and North Korea are trying to escape the group stage for the first occasion since 1980.

Australia's opener against 1980 winners Kuwait heralds the start of a 32-game fiesta which gets into full swing with a triple-header on Saturday.

Games are being played in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra and Newcastle, with the final at Sydney's 83,500-capacity Stadium Australia on January 31.

Atleti draw first blood

AFP, Madrid



Fernando Torres tasted victory against Real Madrid as an Atletico Madrid player for the first time as the La Liga champions downed their city rivals 2-0 in the first leg of their Copa del Rey last 16 tie on Wednesday.

Despite a disappointing performance from Torres on his first appearance since rejoining Atletico on loan from AC Milan, the hosts beat Real for the third time in four attempts this season thanks to Raul Garcia's penalty and a thumping header from Jose Gimenez after half-time.

Last season's Cup winners will now have it all to do when the two sides meet again for the return leg at the Santiago Bernabeu on January 15.

"We have a chance. It is clear that Atletico have the advantage but at home anything can happen. The odds aren't in our favour but we will try our best," said Real boss Carlo Ancelotti, whose side have now lost back-to-back games to start 2015 after a run of 22 consecutive victories.

Meanwhile, his counterpart Diego Simeone refused to accept that the tie

was now Atletico's to lose.

"We have a lot of respect for Real Madrid. They have a great coach and great squad and the tie is definitely not over."

Both coaches signalled that their priorities lay elsewhere prior to kick off as Cristiano Ronaldo was left on the bench by Ancelotti.

However, the hosts were indebted to one of those coming into the side after just two minutes when Jan Oblak brilliantly parried a towering header from Sergio Ramos, reminiscent of his equaliser in the Champions League final between the two sides in May which swung the match in Real's favour.

The visitors then had a goal rightly ruled out from another setpiece as Gareth Bale was flagged offside when he headed James Rodriguez's free-kick into the far corner.

Straight from the free-kick, Atletico then had their first effort on goal as Oblak released Antoine Griezmann with a long ball and his low effort was turned behind by Keylor Navas.

Griezmann was then presented with Atletico's best chance of the opening 45 minutes when he robbed Rafael Varane and closed in on goal, but his French international team-mate recov-

ered to avert the danger with a fine last-ditch challenge.

Torres, meanwhile, was enduring a nightmare opening half as he consistently gave the ball away and was caught offside on numerous occasions.

Real passed up a couple of half chances to go in ahead at the break as Benzema fired straight at Oblak before Sami Khedira headed over when unmarked inside the area.

The visitors also had the first opening of the second period when Bale prodded wide from a narrow angle.

However, it was Atletico who finally made the breakthrough when Garcia was adjudged to have been pulled down by Ramos and the midfielder composed himself to fire low into Navas's left-hand corner.

Torres's evening ended early as he was replaced by Koke, while Ancelotti quickly summoned Ronaldo from the bench in the bid for an away goal, with Rodriguez making way.

Yet, the World Player of the Year made little impact on Atletico's well-marshalled defence and centre-back Gimenez then proved to be a star at the other end as he rose highest to power home Koke's corner 13 minutes from time.

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