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'I'll leave if players don't back me'

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Luis Enrique claimed he hadn't been affected by rumours that he could become the latest high-profile exit from the Camp Nou should his side fail to beat Atletico Madrid on Sunday.

However, the 44-year-old said he would step down after just seven months in the job if he felt he no longer had the backing of his players.

"There are so many reports, some of them badly intentioned," he said on Saturday.

"I won't get involved in this dangerous game. What I can guarantee is that the day I see that my players don't follow me, I will leave."

On the field there was some respite as Barca eased towards the quarterfinals of the Copa del Rey with a 5-0 thrashing of Elche on Thursday. However, the coach's name was booed by the home fans as they showed their support for Messi.

"I continue to be concentrated and motivated. There is nothing that will distract me," Luis Enrique added.



Liverpool midfielder Lazar Markovic (L) scores the all-important goal against Sunderland during their Premier League encounter at the Stadium of Light yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ronaldo wins Salon d'Or

GOAL.COM

Cristiano Ronaldo has won the inaugural Salon d'Or for the best hairstyle in football after taking a huge 32.7 per cent of the vote.

The Real Madrid star was picked by nearly a third of Goal readers for his stylish shaved sides and comb-over look.

Juventus midfielder Andrea Pirlo was a distant second. His retro long hair and beard combination took 9.4% of the vote.

Barcelona and Brazil star Neymar was third with 7.9% for his spiky, dyed mop.

The original 20-player long-list was compiled by international hair stylist Daniel Johnson, who cuts the hair of many football stars, including Liverpool's Mario Balotelli – who came sixth with 7% of the vote – and Ronaldo's teammate Gareth Bale.

"Ronaldo deserves this victory," Daniel told Goal. "He wears his hair like the badge on his shirt – with serious pride."

"What's great about Ronaldo's hairstyle is that it suits difference face shapes – and the shape of the face is vital."

"I think that will have been a factor in the voting – it's the haircut fans are most likely to get. For example, Gareth Bale asked me for a similar cut, and that became massive among fans, with 1.6 million asking barbers for the style after he joined Real Madrid."

At total of 37,458 Goal users voted for the 2014 Salon d'Or.

Wenger sold cigarettes

GOAL.COM

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger says that he used to smoke on the bench due to stress and has revealed that he used to sell cigarettes at his family pub.

Wenger has previously been forced to speak on the subject after midfielder Jack Wilshere was pictured smoking while on holiday and this week the club fined Wojciech Szczesny €25,500 for lighting up in the showers following the 2-0 defeat at Southampton.

A video of the Frenchman smoking in the dugout during his time with Monaco re-emerged in the wake of Szczesny's misdemeanour and the Gunners boss has explained that cigarettes were a big part of his early life.

Chelsea regain lead

AFP, London

Chelsea took sole possession of first place in the Premier League table after they beat Newcastle United 2-0 on Saturday and Manchester City drew 1-1 at Everton.

Chelsea began the day dead-level with City, but with the defending champions dropping points for only the second time in 10 matches, Jose Mourinho's side moved two points clear.

Newcastle had beaten Chelsea 2-1 in the reverse fixture and despite still being without a manager following Alan Pardew's departure, they threatened to pull off a repeat in the first half at Stamford Bridge.

Petr Cech was deputising in goal for Chelsea due to a finger injury to Thibaut Courtois and he had to save from Remy Cabella and Yoan Gouffran, while Moussa Sissoko slammed a shot against the post.

Chelsea lost Cesar Azpilicueta to an apparent groin injury in the 37th minute, but they went ahead four minutes later when Oscar tapped in Branislav Ivanovic's cross after Willian took a quick corner.

Mourinho's side improved after the break and added a delightfully constructed second goal just before the hour, with Diego Costa gathering a clever back-heel from Oscar and drilling in his 15th goal of the campaign.

At Goodison Park, Everton enjoyed the best of the first half against City, with Seamus Coleman hitting the bar.

LA LIGA Real back on track

REUTERS, Madrid

La Liga leaders Real Madrid returned to winning ways after consecutive defeats when they shrugged off playing most of the second half with 10 men to secure a 3-0 win at home to mid-table Espanyol on Saturday.

Beaten 2-1 at Valencia in La Liga last weekend and 2-0 at Atletico Madrid in a King's Cup last 16, first leg in midweek, Real took the lead at their Bernabeu arena when Cristiano Ronaldo set James Rodriguez up to score in the 12th minute.

Gareth Bale arrowed a free kick over the wall and into the net off a post to make it 2-0 in the 28th minute before fullback Fabio Coentrao was shown a straight red card for a dangerous tackle eight minutes into the second half.

Despite that setback, Real remained in control and substitute Nacho clipped home a third goal for the world and European champions 14 minutes from time.

Goalies shine brightly

AFP, Sydney



Birthday boy Wang Dalei's penalty stop helped China upset Saudi Arabia 1-0 as a string of top saves made all the difference at the Asian Cup on Saturday.

South Korea and Uzbekistan also had their goalkeepers to thank as they both won by the same 1-0 scoreline on a cliff-hanging day two in Australia.

Surprise result of the day belonged to China, who edged three-time winners Saudi Arabia in Brisbane courtesy of Yu Hai's deflected second-half free kick.

Just moments before the goal Wang, who was celebrating his 26th birthday, kept China in it when he dived to his left to save Naif Hazazi's tame penalty.

Victory put a huge smile on the faces of Alain Perrin's China, who have never won the Asian Cup and will now be eyeing their first appearance in the knockout stages since hosting the tournament in 2004.

"Our tactics worked very well, we hit them on the counter-attack and caused a lot of trouble for our opponents," Perrin told reporters. "The match was very, very difficult for us but we gained a lot of joy from it. We've been preparing for this tournament for a long time."

South Korea, World Cup semifinalists in 2002 but seeking a first Asian title in 55 years, got off to an unconvincing start as they beat Oman 1-0 through Cho Young-

RESULTS

South Korea 1 (Cho 45+1) Oman 0
Uzbekistan 1 (Sergeev 62) North Korea 0
China 1 (Yu 81) Saudi Arabia 0

Cheol's strike in stoppage time at the end of the first half in Canberra.

English-based goalkeeper Ali Al Habsi produced some quality saves but had a moment to forget as he parried a rebound to Cho, who gobbled up the chance with a clinical finish.

But Korean shot-stopper Kim Jin-Hyeon later superbly tipped Imad Al Hosni's header onto the bar to ensure the Taeguk Warriors came away with all three points.

Oman coach Paul Le Guen was left fuming at referee Peter O'Leary's decision to wave away a penalty appeal when Qasim Saeed looked to have been brought down in the box.

"I don't want to have an advantage -- no, no. I ask for equity," stormed the Frenchman. "It's a 100 percent penalty, no hesitation. But (we didn't get it) because of what? Because we are Oman? It's a very, very bad decision at this level."

Uzbekistan also relied heavily on goalkeeper Ignaty Nesterov as they ground out a 1-0 win over unfancied North Korea in torrential rain.

Nesterov saw little action in the Group B tie but he was alert enough to acrobatically palm away Pak Kwang-Ryong's powerful header just before the final whistle.

Neuer urged to savour Ballon d'Or

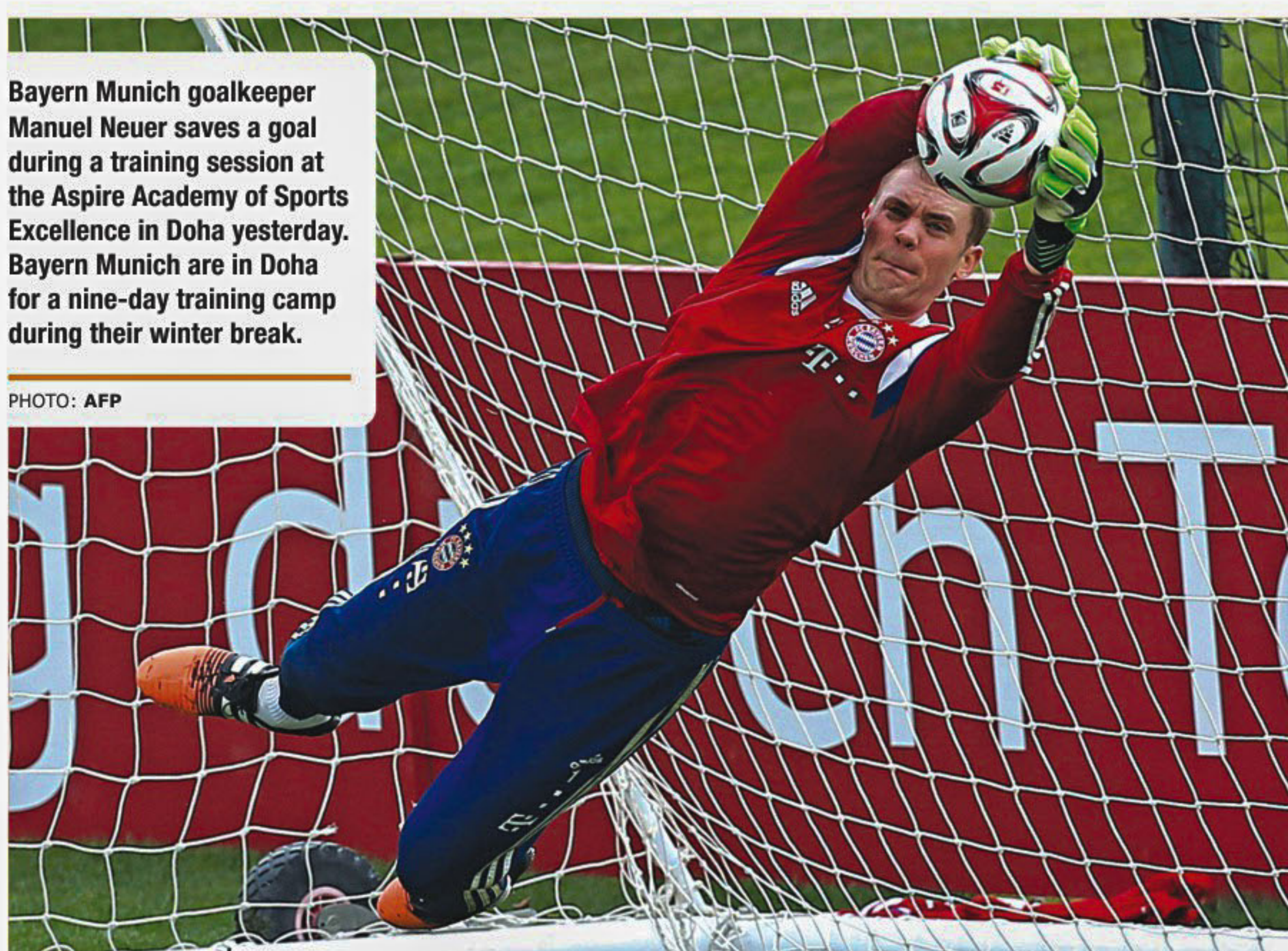
AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Pep Guardiola on Saturday urged his goalkeeper Manuel Neuer to savour the occasion at Monday's Ballon d'Or gala in Zurich, rather than worrying about winning the prize.

Speaking at Bayern's winter training camp in Doha, Qatar, Guardiola said: "I said to him exactly what I said to Franck Ribery last year. Don't go there to win but to savour it."

Guardiola added that Neuer should be "very proud...because it is very difficult" to make the three-man shortlist.

Germany's World Cup-winning goalkeeper joins habitual podium-dwellers Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi on the shortlist.



Bayern Munich goalkeeper Manuel Neuer saves a goal during a training session at the Aspire Academy of Sports Excellence in Doha yesterday. Bayern Munich are in Doha for a nine-day training camp during their winter break.

PHOTO: AFP

Maria's Brisbane joy

AFP, Brisbane



Maria Sharapova won the 34th title of her career on Saturday when she outlasted Ana Ivanovic in the thrilling final match of the Brisbane International.

Sharapova won 6-7 (4/7), 6-3, 6-3, clinching victory in two hours and 38 minutes in front of a packed crowd at the steamy Pat Rafter Arena.

It was the 13th year in a row that the Russian has won at least one WTA title.

The match, played in typically hot and humid conditions in the Queensland capital, was the perfect Australian Open preparation for the two top seeds, who met in the Melbourne final in 2008.

"I came into this final expecting a tough match," Sharapova said.

"The matches we had last year were always very intense and high quality. That's what you expect in a final atmosphere."

"I love coming back here, starting here," she added.

"I played four good matches against very

different types of opponents -- couldn't have asked for better preparation."

Sharapova started brilliantly and raced to a 4-1 lead before Ivanovic struck back and levelled the set.

She then took control of the tiebreak to strike first blood in the final.

Sharapova broke early in the second set and kept the advantage to level the match at one set apiece.

Ivanovic took a medical time out at the end of the set to have an abdominal strain re-taped and when she returned, Sharapova promptly broke and went ahead 3-1.

Ivanovic fought back once more to get the set back on serve, but some fierce groundstrokes from the world number two saw Sharapova break again, and this time there was no coming back for Ivanovic.

"I really thought it was a high quality match from the first moment on," Ivanovic said.

"There were not many unforced errors, I would say."

"The last two sets were a lot closer than maybe the score indicated. There were really a few points that decided it here and there."