



Real Madrid forward Gareth Bale was at the top of his game yesterday, scoring three times in his side's 5-0 demolition of Deportivo la Coruna at the Santiago Bernabeu in Zinedine Zidane's first game in charge of Los Blancos.

PHOTO: AFP

Messi tipped for fifth Ballon d'Or

AFP, Zurich



Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi is targeting an unprecedented fifth Ballon d'Or award in Zurich on Monday, with the Argentine heavily favoured to reclaim the prize from three-time winner Cristiano Ronaldo.

Brazil striker Neymar, who plays alongside Messi at Barca, is also in the running to be crowned world player of the year after he was included on the three-man shortlist for the first time.

Messi and Neymar, along with overlooked Uruguay star Luis Suarez, formed a formidable front three that propelled Barca to five trophies in 2015, including a second Champions League, La Liga and Copa del Rey treble in six seasons.

Messi, who won the award four times in a row from 2009-2012, scored 48 goals for Barca in 2015 as the Catalan giants reclaimed their status as the world's top club side, easily overcoming South American champions River Plate in the Club World Cup in Japan last month.

Barca president Josep Maria Bartomeu, who will be in Zurich for the ceremony, has little doubt as to who he thinks should win the award.

"If I had to vote, I would vote for Leo Messi of course. He is the best player in the world and I hope he wins it," Bartomeu told Canal Plus.

Enrique, who is up for coach of the year alongside Bayern Munich's Pep Guardiola and Jorge Sampaoli -- the mastermind behind Chile's Copa America triumph -- added: "It is the personality that a world number one has. [Messi] is a unique and unrepeatable player."

By comparison, it was a turbulent season for Ronaldo -- world player of the year in 2008, 2013 and 2014 -- and Real Madrid as they played second fiddle to their arch rivals despite a contribution of 54 goals in 52 games from their Portuguese talisman.

Neymar may appear an outsider for the award this time, but the 23-year-old Brazilian is emerging as the main threat to end the Messi-Ronaldo Ballon d'Or stranglehold -- Kaka in 2007 was the last player other than the dominant duo to claim the prize -- after transforming his prodigious talent into 41 goals of his own this past year.

Enrique also insisted that Messi should walk away with another prize in Zurich after being nominated for the best goal of the year for his sensational solo effort in the final of the Copa del Rey against Athletic Bilbao.

Zizou hails Bale after rousing start

AFP, Madrid



Zinedine Zidane has urged Gareth Bale to maintain his sensational form after the Welshman got the Frenchman's reign as Real Madrid boss off to a flying start with a hat-trick in a 5-0 demolition of Deportivo la Coruna on Saturday.

Madrid moved to within two points of La Liga leaders Barcelona on Zidane's bow in senior management at the Santiago Bernabeu as Bale registered his second hat-trick in four games in between Karim Benzema's double.

Bale now has 10 goals to his name in his last seven outings for Madrid and his display dismissed suggestions that he had been disappointed by Rafael Benitez's unceremonious sacking after just seven months in the job earlier in the week.

However, Zidane focused on the former Spurs man's defensive duties as well as his finishing in arguably Bale's best run of form since joining Madrid three years ago.

"Gareth has to do the same as everyone else. When we don't have the ball he has to defend, then when we have to he can open the game up and play on the wing," said Zidane.

"That is what he did today. I am happy with his

contribution. It isn't easy to score three goals and we hope he continues like that."

Zidane's appointment as the club's 11th coach in 12 years under club president Florentino Perez was criticised in some quarters due to his lack of managerial experience.

However, his promotion to the top job at the Bernabeu has been a popular one with the club's

"Today is the start of a new challenge for me. It is an important role to be the coach here and I want to enjoy it," added Zidane.

"I thank the fans, but they come to see the players and I think today they have been rewarded with the effort the team showed and the victory."

"The fans were behind the team right until the end, there was a good atmosphere but we need to continue."

"We need to think that this is just the first game and see what happens in the next one. Our idea is to play good football and win as many matches as possible."

His players are also backing the manager, with Croatia midfielder Luka Modric reserving high praise for his new boss.

"I am sorry for Rafa and I would like to thank him for his work, but being honest and seeing today's game I think that the change has been positive," Modric told reporters.

"You just have to compare this match with the previous ones. The team's attitude was different and hopefully we can continue in the same way."

"We played a lot more rapidly and we functioned as a team in the way was always should function," Modric said.

"Today we were a team from the start, up front, at the back and in the middle."

RESULTS			
Getafe Vazquez 57	1 - 0	Real Betis	
Sevilla Gameiro 24, 59-pen	2 - 0	Athletic Bilbao	
Real Madrid Benzema 15, 90+1, Bale 22, 49, 63	5 - 0	Deportivo la Coruna	
Levante Deyverson 72, Morales 81	2 - 1	Rayo Vallecano Hernandez 83	
Villarreal	2 - 0	Sporting Gijon	

fans with Zidane fondly remembered from his five years as a player at the club, most notably scoring a sensational winning goal in the 2002 Champions League final.

And in stark contrast to Benitez's final days in charge, there was an air of optimism around a packed Bernabeu as the fans braved the freezing January temperatures.

Valbuena ready to move on

AFP, Paris



France midfielder Mathieu Valbuena indicated on Sunday that he would be willing to play alongside Karim Benzema in the national team at Euro 2016 despite the ongoing blackmail case involving the Real Madrid striker.

"We will see how it goes, but yes, no problem, anything is possible. It wasn't like it was a murder," the Lyon midfielder told television station TF1.

His comments come despite Benzema being sidelined by the French Football Federation after being charged with complicity to blackmail and conspiring to commit a criminal act involving a sex tape featuring Valbuena.

The charges carry a possible prison sentence of five years. He was also banned from meeting 31-year-old Valbuena, a midfielder for Lyon, where Benzema began his career.



VALBUENA BENZEMA

Valbuena's form has recently dipped to such an extent that he may struggle to win his place back in Didier Deschamps' France side and he admitted that "this affair will come up again with the Euros approaching and two France players implicated."

He added: "The Euros have been our objective for the last two years. We are preparing for them and I don't imagine myself for a second not being involved."

"There is no guarantee. I have had a chat with the coach but I am not going to discuss what was said. We talked about a lot of things that made me feel better."

Currently sidelined with a thigh injury, Valbuena last played for Les Bleus in a 2-1 friendly win in Denmark in October.

He was left out of the squad for the November friendly matches against Germany and England with Deschamps saying he wanted to "protect" his player in the wake of the blackmail affair.

"It was hard to accept. At the time I was angry because I was the victim and was penalised twice... Looking back, I now understand his decision. 2015 is behind me now. It's time to move on," he said.

Sassuolo stun Inter

AFP, Milan



Sassuolo striker Domenico Berardi hit a last-gasp penalty to stun Inter Milan 1-0 and leave the Serie A leaders at risk of losing top spot on Sunday.

Roberto Mancini's men welcomed Sassuolo looking to build on last week's 1-0 win at Empoli, which kept the Inter top with a one-point lead over Fiorentina and Napoli.

But Mancini had warned of the danger posed by Eusebio Di Francesco's visitors, and the Italian who led the Milan outfit to three consecutive league titles in his previous spell in charge was spot on.

Inter failed to build on a solid start when Mauro Icardi and Adem Ljajic missed clear chances inside the opening three minutes.

The hosts were undone at the last-gasp when Brazilian defender Miranda hauled down Berardi in the final minute of added-on time.

Berardi made no mistake from the penalty

RESULTS			
Inter Milan	0 - 1	Sassuolo Berardi 90+	
Carpi Pascutti 26, Lollo 70	2 - 1	Udinese Zapata 72	
Fiorentina Roncaglia 90+4	1 - 3	Lazio Balde 45+1, Milinkovic-Savic 90+2, Anderson 90+6	
Roma	1 - 1	AC Milan	

spot, firing over the body of Slovenian 'keeper Samir Handanovic to secure a famous win for Sassuolo, who leapfrog AC Milan into sixth place to sit eight points off the pace.

Inter remain top with a one-point lead on Fiorentina, who suffered a shock 3-1 defeat on Saturday to Lazio, although Napoli, in third also a point off the pace, can reclaim top spot with a win away to Frosinone later in the day.

The defeat will also be welcomed by Juventus, although champions -- in fourth at three points off the pace -- face a tough away trip to Sampdoria in Sunday's late fixture.



Sassuolo's Domenico Berardi (C) slots home the decider past Inter Milan goalkeeper Samir Handanovic at the San Siro yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Yasir appeals suspension

CRICINFO, Lahore

Yasir Shah, the Pakistan leg-spinner, has decided to appeal against his suspension for testing positive for a banned substance. He has informed the ICC through the PCB that he will contest the case. The ICC will now form an independent tribunal within two weeks to hear the case.

"We, on behalf of Yasir, have exercised the right of appeal and informed the ICC that he will contest his case," a PCB spokesman told ESPNcricinfo. "It's the player's right and he is ready to put up his case before the ICC."

According to the details compiled by the PCB after an investigation by a medical panel, Yasir had reportedly taken his wife's blood pressure medication, unaware of the banned substance contained in the

Djokovic downs Nadal in final

AFP, Doha



Novak Djokovic won his first title of 2016 on Saturday, playing "perfect" tennis to thrash arch-rival Rafael Nadal in straight sets during the Qatar Open final.

The near faultless world number one cruised to victory 6-1, 6-2 in a match lasting just one hour, 13 minutes. The win not only secured the 60th career title for the Serb but also means he is leading for the first time in his head-to-head battle with Nadal, winning 24 of the 47 matches they have now played against each other.

"I played pretty much perfect tennis today from the very beginning I managed to get every shot the way I wanted," said Djokovic afterwards.

He added that he was playing the best tennis of his career: "It did feel as close to perfection as it can get."

"From the first to the last point I managed to impose my own tactical approach and strategy and what I have kind of prepared myself for, and the conditions were played to my favour."

Nadal cut a forlorn figure after the match and said he'd never seen anyone produce a performance like Djokovic's.

"Well, for the match is easy to analyse," Nadal told reporters. "I played against a player who did everything perfect. I know nobody playing tennis like this ever. Since I know this sport I never saw somebody playing at this level."

He told reporters in Spanish that Djokovic's play had been "stratospheric".

Raonic eases past Federer

AFP, Brisbane

Big-serving Canadian Milos Raonic stunned an out-of-sorts Roger Federer to win the Brisbane International 6-4, 6-4 on Sunday.

Raonic, 25, broke the 17-time Grand Slam champion once in each set to win the final, only his second win over Federer in 11 meetings.

Federer, who had been improving every round after starting the tournament with a slight illness, was no match for Raonic, who served powerfully and came to the net at every opportunity.

The win gave Raonic his eighth title on the ATP tour and reversed the result of last year's final, won by 34-year-old Federer in three tight sets.

Federer was off his game throughout, struggling to make any impression.



Novak Djokovic kisses the trophy after winning the Qatar Open.

PHOTO: REUTERS



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