

SPORT

2015 FIFA BALLON D'OR WINNERS
 FIFA Ballon d'Or (Men): Lionel Messi
 FIFA Ballon d'Or (Women): Carli Lloyd
 FIFA coach of the year (Men): Luis Enrique
 FIFA coach of the year (Women): Jill Ellis
 FIFA Puskas Award (Best goal): Wendell Lira

MESSI BACK ON TOP



A thrilled Lionel Messi poses with his trophy after bagging the FIFA Ballon d'Or award for the player of the year for a record fifth time at the award ceremony in Zurich on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

AFP, Madrid
 Lionel Messi deposed eternal rival Cristiano Ronaldo to take back his crown as the undisputed king of world football by lifting a record fifth Ballon d'Or on Monday.

Much has changed since, just 12 months ago, a disgruntled Messi, fresh from losing a World Cup final and disillusioned with coach Luis Enrique's regime at Barcelona, sat in stony silence as Ronaldo announced his intention to hunt down the Argentine's then-record four Ballon d'Or haul.

A year on, the roles were reversed, Messi's record now even further beyond Ronaldo's reach in the personal duel between the two men who have taken standards to unseen heights in their domination of the sport during the past decade.

Rarely has there been such little debate over who was the deserving winner. Even in the Spanish capital, unlike in previous years, there was no campaign for Ronaldo in the year he became Real Madrid's all-time leading goalscorer.

In Zurich last year, Messi had even cast doubt on his future at Barcelona. His benching for a 1-0 defeat to Real Sociedad the most ignominious start to what would turn out to be the second most successful in Barca's 116-year history.

Messi missed an open training session with the club's fans, Barca sporting director Andoni Zubizarreta was sacked and club legend Carles

Puyol walked. Enrique would have followed suit had Messi demanded it.

Instead, he used the fuel of the most disappointing year of his career in 2014 to fire Barca to a treble of

Champions League, La Liga and Copa del Rey trophies.

His partnership with Neymar and Luis Suarez suddenly kicked into gear, between them hitting 137 of Barca's

record 180 goals in 2015, making the South American trio one of the most frightening frontlines the game has ever seen.

Even a two-month injury layoff due

to knee ligament damage couldn't derail Messi's case as he also scored in the UEFA Super Cup and Club World Cup finals to take Barca's total trophy haul for the year to five.

There was still disappointment at international level. Another final defeat - this time on penalties to Chile at the Copa America - means Messi has still to deliver a major trophy for La Albiceleste.

However, whilst others may use his record with Argentina to doubt his candidacy as the best player ever, in Barcelona 2015 enshrined his legacy as the greatest.

He scored the goal that sealed a fifth La Liga title in seven years and maybe even his best ever goal in the Copa del Rey final.

Yet, his signature moment came with the return of an old mentor in Pep Guardiola when Bayern Munich visited in the Champions League semi-finals in May.

Messi won by a landslide. Two magical goals in three minutes at the Camp Nou dealt a killer blow from which Bayern never recovered.

"There is not a system or coach to stop talent of his magnitude," said Guardiola.

| ROLL OF HONOUR | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| 2015 | Lionel Messi |
| 2014 | Cristiano Ronaldo |
| 2013 | Cristiano Ronaldo |
| 2012 | Lionel Messi |
| 2011 | Lionel Messi |
| 2010 | Lionel Messi |
| 2009 | Lionel Messi |
| 2008 | Cristiano Ronaldo |
| 2007 | Ricardo Kaka |
| 2006 | Fabio Cannavaro |

Big bucks for finalists

Dhaka leg rescheduled; final on Jan 22

SPORTS REPORTER

Unlike the previous edition, there will be cash awards for the two finalists of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup, informed Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) officials yesterday. The champion team will get 50,000 dollars and the runners-up team will receive 25,000 dollars while there will be trophies awarded to individual performers, according to BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag.

"The champion team will get 50,000 dollars while the runners-up team will receive 25,000 dollars. The champion team will only take a replica of the trophy while the original trophy, which is being prepared with 21 bhori gold, will stay with the game's governing body," Shohag said during a press conference held at the BFF House yesterday.

In the last edition, the champion and runners-up teams had only received trophies and there were no cash awards apart from participation money for the teams.

Meanwhile, the Dhaka leg of the eight-team tournament has been rescheduled, the BFF spokesman informed, with the final now taking place on January 22 instead of previously scheduled January 20.

The eight remaining matches of the group stages will be held from tomorrow up to January 16, with each day featuring two matches. The semifinals will be held on January 18 and 19 and the final will

kick off at 5:00pm on January 22.

Nepal will take on Sri Lanka in the first match of the Dhaka leg at 3:00pm tomorrow, and that match will be followed by the one between Bangladesh national team and Felda United representing Malaysia. All the matches of the Dhaka leg will be held at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

"Like the previous edition, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will witness the final and hand over the prizes. Since the Prime Minister did not have any time slot available before that date [Jan 22], we had to reschedule the matches," Shohag said while explaining the reason for rescheduling.

Meanwhile, BFF president Kazi Salahuddin has hoped that the next editions of this tournament will be more glamorous so that it becomes a tournament which will be recognised at international level.

"We are introducing cash awards at this edition, and hopefully we will arrange the tournament with more teams, and better one, so that the tournament becomes an international attraction," Salahuddin told reporters at his office.

"I believe the level of competition has increased from the last edition. However, we have had some complications regarding the venue. I was also surprised to find the odd infrastructure of the stadium in Jessore [Shamsul Huda Stadium]. We will try to make sure that these types of complications don't arise in future," said the BFF boss.

Kazakhstan to pick coach via internet poll

AFP, Almaty

Kazakhstan's football federation is giving fans the chance to help select a new coach for the national team via an Internet vote, it was announced on Monday.

Football lovers will first be able to cast ballots in an online poll to decide if the next national manager should be foreign or Kazakh, federation supremo Yerlan Kozhaganov said. If more than 50,000 people participate then the result will be considered valid and the federation will then hold a second round of voting to decide between four candidates.

"We decided to give our fans the chance to express their will, to exert an impact on this strategic decision," Kozhaganov told local media.

"Football cannot develop without the involvement of the fans in the game. If they exercise their right to influence this decision it will definitely be for the benefit of our squad."

The national team hot-seat in the energy-rich state is currently vacant after the contract of the previous manager, Yury Krasnozhan of Russia, expired last month.

"We do not only talk about the full openness of our federation, we are doing our best to put it into practice," Kozhaganov said.

Maldives edge Cambodia

ANISUR RAHMAN from Jessore



A brace from Hassan Naiz gave Maldives a winning start in the Bangabandhu Gold Cup as the SAFF Suzuki Cup semifinalists beat Cambodia 3-2 in a pulsating Group B encounter at the Shamsul Huda Stadium in Jessore yesterday.

The way both teams played throughout the match where the spectators, who were given the opportunity to enter the stadium without tickets, will be remembered for a long time as the action-packed fourth and final last match of Jessore leg was full with excitement in every move before the islanders had the last laugh, giving a clear warning to other teams in the remaining matches.

Maldives brought a comparatively young side, excluding seven senior players including Ali Ashfaq, but his young brigade was good enough to show their class and edged a competitive side from Cambodia, who came from behind twice before conceding the third goal, thanks to a fumble from goalkeeper Seri Rath Um.

Both sides got off to a fine start with their good running but Maldives stunned Cambodia in the fourth minute when Easa Ismail, capitalising on a through-pass, made a diagonal run outside the box to give the Cambodia goalkeeper no time to react as his powerful low left-footed drive embraced the near post.

Cambodia showed signs of a comeback as Polroth Chheng headed wide from inside the box before he made amends by providing a nice ball for Vanderth Son, who created space with a back-heel before latching a grounder past Maldives goalkeeper Faisal Mohamed to equalise the margin in the

15th minute. Then Easa Ismail rattled the crossbar from a free-kick and Hassan Naiz volley was tipped over the crossbar by the Cambodia goalkeeper on the half-hour mark before Polroth Chheng was denied by Maldives goalkeeper in the 35th minute.

From a counter attack, Maldives restored the lead through Naiz, who finished clinically with a grounder from the edge of the box in the 38th minute before Cambodia bit back through Dina Tit, who drove a grounder home after availing a back-pass from Chanrasmy Sok in the stoppage time of the first half.

After resumption, Cambodia looked better in ball possession and created a couple of good chances before Maldives

sealed the match in the 78th minute through Naiz, who did not mistake to tap in from inside the box after Cambodian goalkeeper had slipped a long ball from his grip.

"I am very pleased with the young team even though the ground was very hard and it was not easy to pass the ball properly. But the boys were good enough to win the match by taking the chances," said Maldives coach Ricky Herbert at the post-match briefing.

"We could not bring many players but our players tried their best throughout the game even though there were some mistakes. We still have two matches left and we will try our best to win every match," said Cambodia coach Taehoon Lee.



Maldives forward Easa Ismail celebrates the opening goal against Cambodia in their Group B fixture of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup at the Shamsul Huda Stadium in Jessore yesterday. The fourth match of the tournament, and the last one in Jessore, proved to be a topsy-turvy affair, with Maldives eventually winning by 3-2 goals.

PHOTO: STAR



Professor Mahboob Ali (L) receives the best golfer award on the opening day of the Aga Khan Gold Cup from Air chief Air Marshall Abu Esrar at the Kurmitola Golf Club on Sunday.

PHOTO: COURTESY

Maradona praises Napoli

AFP, Milan



Diego Maradona offered glowing praise as Napoli boosted their hopes of a first Serie A title since 1990 by going two points clear of champions Juventus and Inter Milan.

The last time Napoli were top of the table at the halfway stage of the season in Italy was 26 years ago, when Maradona led the 'Partenopei' to the second of their two leagues titles in 1990.

But Fiorentina's shock 3-1 defeat to Lazio on Saturday whet Napoli's appetite, and it grew considerably earlier Sunday when Inter suffered a shock 1-0 defeat to Sassuolo at the San Siro.

Gonzalo Higuain hit a brace, including one from the spot, to take his goals tally to 18 goals from 19 games.

Sarri has consistently played down Napoli's title hopes and has every reason after Juventus beat Sampdoria 2-1 in Genoa to claim their ninth victory on the trot to move two places up to second.

Paul Pogba broke the deadlock on 17 minutes with an angled strike and Sami Khedira found himself in acres of space to double the champions' lead on 46 minutes before Antonio Cassano hit a consolation just after the hour.

Inter dropped to third due to inferior goal difference, while Fiorentina are in fourth place at three points behind and Roma are seven points off the pace in fifth after being held 1-1 by AC Milan on Saturday.

Only four months ago Maradona publicly embarrassed Napoli coach Maurizio Sarri following an inauspi-

cious start to the campaign.

On that occasion Sarri, a lifelong Napoli and Maradona fan, soaked up the criticism and on Sunday it was time for payback.

"It's with great joy that I heard about Napoli's result, which we've all been waiting on for many years," said Maradona in a message sent to Sky Sport Italia.

"Knowing that the city of Naples and my Neapolitan fans can enjoy such emotion makes me even happier for them. Go on Napoli. Now I want us to win the league title."

Against a Frosinone side fighting for top flight survival, Napoli took a 20th minute lead when Raul Albiol coolly flicked a volley into the net at the back post following a corner.

Higuain doubled Napoli's lead from the penalty spot on the half-hour and claimed his second in two crazy,

Blatter to appeal ban

AFP, New York

A lawyer for fallen FIFA chief Sepp Blatter on Sunday confirmed he would launch an appeal against his eight-year ban.

"We will appeal it, of course," US-based attorney Richard Cullen confirmed to AFP in an email.

The confirmation came after FIFA's ethics tribunal on Saturday revealed it had provided Blatter and UEFA president Michel Platini with the reasons for imposing the ban, clearing the way for both men to appeal.

A lawyer for Platini, who has also been banned for eight years, had earlier confirmed an appeal would be launched.