

Messi resumes normalcy upon return

AGENCIES

Lionel Messi scored in Paris Saint-Germain's 2-0 win over Angers in Ligue 1 on Wednesday on his first appearance since leading Argentina to victory in the 2022 World Cup.

The Argentina captain broke a bunch of age-old records in Qatar and the latest strike saw Messi bag 696 goals across his senior club career for Barcelona and PSG since debuting for the former in the 2004-05 season. Messi and Cristiano are now tied on the number of goals scored in Europe's top five leagues - featuring England, Spain, Italy, Germany, and France.

Messi's 24th goal for the Parisian side following his move from Barcelona in 2021 now places the 35-year-old five shy of Ronaldo's 701 goal tally in club football, which the 37-year-old Portuguese superstar netted during his illustrious career for Manchester United (118, and 27 in second spell there), Real Madrid (450), Juventus (101), and Sporting CP (5), where he kick-started his club-career in the 2002-03 season.

As the Portugal captain had said his "work is done" in Europe after being unveiled as a player of Saudi Arabian club Al Nassr earlier this month, Messi could soon be the second but the youngest in history to hit the 700 mark and then surpass Ronaldo in becoming the all-time highest scorer in club football.

The two had long been inseparable due to their outrageous and consistent performances, especially during their overlapping spells in Spanish League. However, despite remaining a continent apart, Ronaldo and Messi could soon be reunited on the pitch as PSG are slated for a friendly against a team made up of players from Al Nassr and Al Hilal in Riyadh on January 19.

Earlier, Messi had been rested for PSG's first three matches following the long break in the season caused by the World Cup but he returned to training in Paris a week ago and was back in the starting line-up for this game against Ligue 1's bottom side.

In the meantime, the absence of Kylian Mbappe meant that young striker Hugo Ekitike again started in the home attack at the Parc des Princes and he opened the scoring in the fifth minute from a Nordi Mukiele cross at the end of a move in which Messi also featured.

PSG were not at their sparkling best but Messi swept in his 13th club goal of the season to make it 2-0 with 17 minutes left. Ekitike and Mukiele were again involved before Messi applied the finish. The goal was initially disallowed for offside but a VAR check allowed it to stand.



Lionel Messi scored the second for PSG in their 2-0 win over Angers as he returned to action for Les Parisiens on Wednesday night. The goal was the Argentine's 696th strike in European football, as many as Cristiano Ronaldo scored for Manchester United, Real Madrid and Juventus combined. PHOTO: PSG



Spinners have been a non-factor in the Bangladesh Premier League so far and although the wickets in Chattogram are far more batting-friendly than in Mirpur, spinners like Tajjul Islam -- who is yet to play a single game -- will be hoping to finally get going and make an impact in the country's premier T20 tournament. PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

A need for growing T20 bowling skills

SPORTS REPORTER

It was Fortune Barishal skipper Shakib Al Hasan who said that bowlers have not quite turned up at the ninth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), especially during night fixtures where pitches offered big scores.

As a format, the T20 mindset and culture is still in its primary period. The lack of T20s in the domestic circuit, except the BPL, has been brought up as a key reason for why it is more difficult to bring up players ready for the format.

The batters have found some rhythm and a few bowlers have shown their mettle so far, but as the Chattogram phase begins on Friday - with Chattogram Challengers taking on Fortune Barishal in the day's opening fixture - the onus will be on the bowlers to respond in kind on wickets where runs are expected.

Barishal's Ebadot Hossain talked about the same need for improvement. Although he referred to the quicks, spinners need to get on their game too.

"Chattogram's wickets are always batting friendly. The fast bowlers need to improve their skill and bowl intelligently. Given that wickets are friendly for batters, the pacers with more skill will do better compared to others," Ebadot said while talking to reporters at Chattogram yesterday.

The national team pacer was not just talking about BPL success.



He himself was at the receiving end of a bitter end to Bangladesh's Asia Cup campaign last year, when he bagged crucial wickets but Sri Lanka targeted him at the death and took him for runs to seize the game away from the Tigers. With ICC wickets providing sporting surfaces at the very least, it is the need of the hour to get accustomed to bowling on batting-friendly surfaces. India recently scored over 400 runs in the third ODI in Chattogram but the Bangladesh bowlers can take valuable lessons from the experience.

Sylhet Strikers skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza is the leading wicket-taker with seven wickets in this BPL alongside Al Amin Hossain. Mashrafe has brought his experience and new-ball bowling skills and has not been hit for too many runs. Al Amin though suffered, conceding an economy rate of over nine. Sylhet's other pace duo Rejaur Rahman Raja and Mohammad Amir are second on the list with six wickets. The freedom

to express themselves has not only allowed batters but also the bowlers of Sylhet to shine.

"Raja bagged four wickets in the first game of the Dhaka phase. Everyone said that although the wicket was good, Raja bowled well. Wickets got better and better after that in Dhaka. Chattogram is always good, so if we can do well on these surfaces, it will help in the upcoming World Cup," said Ebadot.

When batters were able to show superiority, bowlers were not often on the mark. The yorkers have not come through while slower deliveries have been picked off when the surface has not held up slightly. "You have to be accurate with your yorkers and slower," he reminded, with death bowling still a headache for the national side.

Ebadot said he has been working with his Bangladesh teammate and Comilla Victorians pacer Mustafizur Rahman to develop his cutters.

"My strength is to bowl fast and I have the yorker going for me. Along with that I am working on cutters and their accuracy. Mustafizur is good at cutters and I was learning from him. He changed the grip of my slower bouncers and it helped me," he said.

Working as a unit always works for pacers. Ebadot has Khaled Ahmed in his side. If the pacers can get their execution right in these BPL tracks, it will be the best thing for the national team.

'Bayern have obligation to sign a goalkeeper'

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich manager Julian Nagelsmann said on Thursday the club "have an obligation" to sign another goalkeeper in winter, with first-choice stopper Manuel Neuer set to miss most of 2023 with a broken leg.

Nagelsmann said he has been impressed with Neuer backup Sven Ulreich at training, but felt another 'keeper was necessary.

"From my perspective, we have an obligation to sign another goalkeeper," Nagelsmann told reporters.

Bayern sit four points clear at the top of the Bundesliga table and will meet Ligue 1 giants Paris Saint-Germain in the first leg of the Round of 16 of the Champions League on February 14.

"The goalkeeper market (in winter) is complex. There is no team which would gladly give up its first-choice goalkeeper."

"There are not many players on the market - and you can't just build one (a goalkeeper)," Nagelsmann added.

Women footballers to gauge progress in Olympic Qualifiers

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh, winners of the SAFF Women's Championship 2022, are all set to feature in the Women's Olympic Football tournament 2024 Asian Qualifiers this year.

Bangladesh were pitted against strong Iran, Myanmar, and Maldives in Group B in Round 1 of the tournament during a draw in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. The group matches are scheduled to be held from April 3 to 11 at a neutral venue which has not been fixed yet.

Some 26 teams, split into seven groups, will play Round 1 with the champions from each group advancing to the second round where DPR Korea, Japan, Australia, China PR, and Korea Republic will take part directly.

Four teams from Round 2 - the three group winners and the best-ranked runners-up - will then face off in Round 3. The top two teams from the Round 3 will eventually qualify for the Paris 2024 Women's Olympic Football Tournament.

"To be honest, we have been pitted against strong teams like Myanmar and Iran and it is tough to overcome them as we lost to Myanmar 0-5 during the Asian Qualifiers of the Tokyo Olympics in 2019 and suffered a 0-5 defeat against Iran during the Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers 2021," said Bangladesh women's team head coach Golam Rabbani Choton.

"However, I am optimistic to perform better this time as the girls are now more mature," Choton said. "We want to see the progress we have made in the last couple of years by taking part in 2024 Qualifiers."

Afghans slam 'pathetic' CA

AFP, Sydney

Australia pulled out of an upcoming series against Afghanistan in the United Arab Emirates on Thursday, citing Taliban moves to further restrict women's rights. The men's team were due to face their Afghan counterparts in three ODI games in March following a tour to India.

The Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) in Kabul described Australia's decision as "pathetic".

"The decision to withdraw... is unfair and unexpected and will have a negative impact," the ACB said in a statement, which did not mention the shrinking of women's rights in Afghanistan nor the Taliban's ban on female sport.

The ACB said it would contact the International Cricket Council and was considering withdrawing its players from Australia's domestic Big Bash League in retaliation.

Cricket Australia (CA) said their decision was taken after talks with concerned parties that included the Australian government.

"This decision follows the recent announcement by the Taliban of further restrictions on women's and girls' education and employment opportunities and their ability to access parks and gyms," it said in a statement. "CA is committed to supporting growing the game for women and men around the world, including in Afghanistan."

"(We) will continue to engage with the Afghanistan Cricket Board in anticipation of improved conditions for women and girls in the country," it said.

The games against Afghanistan were part of the ICC Super League. Australia will forfeit 30 competition points for the series, which go towards World Cup qualification.

However, they have already secured automatic qualification for the 50-over tournament in India later this year.

Nadal's path rocky from the get-go

AGENCIES, Adelaide

Rafael Nadal will face a difficult opening test at the Australian Open against British lefty Jack Draper, while Novak Djokovic and Nick Kyrgios are in the same quarter of the draw, it was revealed Thursday afternoon at Melbourne Park.

Defending champion Nadal will need to be sharp from his first match against Draper, especially after he stormed past Karen Khachanov and into the Adelaide International semifinals on Thursday.

"It'll be amazing to play on court with him, he's a great champion," Draper said of his impending clash against Nadal. "[There are] a lot of emotions obviously when I think of playing him, but that's one thing, I've still got to go and play tomorrow and hopefully do well in this tournament first.

"Whatever happens, it'll be a special occasion for me, still very young in my career, so it's great to have these sort of experiences and exposure to playing someone like Rafa on a big court like that. But I want to play really well and I want to compete hard and do the best I can."

If 22-time major winner Nadal navigates past the British star, his path will not get easier, with one of two Americans - Mackenzie McDonald or reigning Next Gen ATP Finals champion Brandon Nakashima - waiting in the second round.

Also in the Spaniard's quarter is seventh seed Daniil Medvedev, which means a rematch of the 2022 Australian Open final between Nadal and Medvedev could be played in the last eight. Sixteenth seed Frances Tiafoe, who upset Nadal at last year's US Open, is a potential fourth-round opponent.

Nick Kyrgios landed in the opposite quarter. The 19th-seed could play ninth seed Holger Rune in the third round and fifth seed Andrey Rublev in the fourth



round before a quarterfinal clash against Djokovic, who begins his pursuit of a record-tying 22nd major title against Spaniard Roberto Carballes Baena.

In the women's side of the draw, world number one

Iga Swiatek is the one to beat without retired great Serena Williams and last year's champion Ashleigh Barty.

With two-time Melbourne winner Naomi Osaka also missing, it is almost certain that there will be a new name on the Daphne Akhurst trophy.

The only former title-holders left in the draw are out-of-sorts Sofia Kenin, who won in 2020, and Victoria Azarenka, the Belarusian whose second Australian Open triumph was a decade ago.

Poland's Swiatek is clear favourite, having dominated women's tennis following the retirement in March last year of the Australian Barty.

Swiatek secured eight WTA titles in 2022 and became the first woman in six years to win two Grand Slams in the same season - at Roland Garros and New York - to cement her place at the top of the rankings.

Now she has her sights on a maiden title at Melbourne Park, which would leave the 21-year-old needing only a Wimbledon championship to complete a career slam.

"I'm going to try to kind of cut off everything that happened last year and just focus on the future because I feel like I can take a lot of experience from these tournaments last year," she said earlier this month.

Ons Jabeur, the world number two, also enjoyed a breakthrough season in 2022, reaching two Grand Slam finals, and her first major cannot be far away.

Should Swiatek falter, the Tunisian will be in the hunt, as will American teenager Coco Gauff. 18-year-old Gauff, who last year broke into the top 10 for the first time, kicked off her season by clinching the Auckland Classic title last week for a third WTA crown.

"This gives me a lot of confidence," Gauff, touted as the natural heir to Serena Williams, said. "I wanted a win but did not expect it in the first tournament of the year."