

## Sports

# 'Welcome Leo' - Messi meets PSG teammates at first training session

**PARIS:** After a rapturous reception and raucous unveiling from the fans on Wednesday Lionel Messi got to know his new teammates at Paris Saint-Germain's Camp des Loges training facility yesterday. Much has been made of Messi lining up with Brazil's Neymar and France striker Kylian Mbappe in what will be a fearsome attack for PSG in their quest to win a maiden Champions League. World Cup winner Mbappe was one of the first to extend his welcome to Messi after his official arrival and the 22-year-old posted his best wishes to the newcomer on social media.

Mbappe has been linked with a move to Real Madrid with only a year left of his PSG contract. "Welcome to Paris, Leo," Mbappe wrote alongside photos with the pair hugging. The 34-year-old former Barcelona player has been on downtime since winning the Copa America with Argentina in July, and started his first PSG run-out with simple physical exercises.

"I've been out of action for around month and I need to get physically ready. I hope to be ready as soon as possible, because I can't wait to play," Messi said at his unveiling at the Parc des Princes on Wednesday. He is unlikely to make his debut for PSG soon, and certainly not

this weekend when Mauricio Pochettino's team play Strasbourg in Ligue 1. "I can't tell you when my first game will be but I can tell you I'm dying to get started," he said. "I want it to be soon."

Messi only arrived in the French capital on Tuesday before penning a two-year contract with the option of a third season. The club also revealed yesterday it had paid a signing on bonus to the player in PSG's own virtual currency which it calls \$PSG Fan Tokens, originally sold at €2 each and currently trading over €30 each. "The coins are there to create a link between the fans and the club, and it's the first time we have used them in this way," the Parisians said in a statement without saying how many they had given to Messi.

PSG quickly emerged as the favorites to sign Messi following the shock of his departure last week from Barcelona and he arrives eyeing a fifth Champions League, with the most recent of his four victories with his old club coming in 2015. PSG are reportedly paying €35 million (\$41 million) a year to Messi, who will wear the number 30 jersey - with fans continuing to line up outside the club's different shops in the capital to buy the shirt with his name and number on the back. —AFP



**PARIS:** A man poses wearing a jersey of PSG's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi in front of a large banner reading "Welcome Leo Messi" on a wall of the Paris Saint-Germain's Parc des Princes stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

## What does Messi arrival mean for Mbappe's future?

**PARIS:** Lionel Messi has been reunited with his old Barcelona teammate Neymar in an all-star attack at Paris Saint-Germain, but the question now is whether the arrival of the Argentinian superstar could actually push Kylian Mbappe out of the French giants. PSG's plan is to have the three forwards playing together in an all-star attack that they hope can finally win them the Champions League, yet Mbappe's long-term future remains a source of doubt.

Messi has just penned a two-year contract worth a reported €35 million (\$41 million) a year with the option of a third season. In May, Neymar, who is 29, extended his deal with the club to 2025. Mbappe, in contrast, is out of contract at the end of this season and is a long-time target for Real Madrid. "Mbappe is possible," said the headline on the front of Madrid-based sports daily AS on Tuesday. "The arrival of Messi at PSG pushes Mbappe aside and paves the way for his arrival in Madrid."

Mbappe has refused to rush into a decision over his future, leaving PSG in something of an awkward situation. They are not considering selling him but nor do they want to see a player who cost €180 million (\$211 million), the second-highest transfer fee in history, leave for free when his contract expires next June. "Everyone knows that I am deeply attached to this club," Mbappe said in an interview with broadcaster Canal Plus in May. But I want to feel that I am in a place where I really can win, where there is a project in place to do that."

When asked about Mbappe's future at Messi's unveiling on Wednesday, PSG's Qatari president Nasser Al-Khelaifi insisted that the France striker was now in the best possible

place to fulfil his Champions League ambitions. "Kylian is a Paris player. He is very competitive, he has a winning mentality. He has said publicly that he wanted a competitive team and there is no more competitive team than this," Khelaifi said. "He has no excuse for doing anything other than staying."

### Real need new talisman

As well as Messi, PSG have also signed Gianluigi Donnarumma, Sergio Ramos, Georginio Wijnaldum and Achraf Hakimi this summer. They look stronger than ever in all areas of the pitch, but might Mbappe feel that he will have to give up too much of the limelight by staying in Paris now Messi has arrived? Mbappe wants to be the number one. After all, he is the only member of PSG's frontline to have won the World Cup.

The former Monaco player has been the top scorer in Ligue 1 in each of the last three seasons, with 27 in the last campaign. That may not mean anything, but for PSG it is true that, given his age, Mbappe represents the future and is seen as the natural heir to an ageing Messi as the prominent player in world football.

Messi's arrival in Paris is further confirmation of the changing balance of power in the European game, away from the traditional elite like Madrid and Barcelona to PSG, Manchester City and Chelsea, clubs with the wealth of Gulf states or oligarchs behind them. But Madrid see Mbappe as the man to lead them back to the summit of European football, three years on from the departure of Cristiano Ronaldo.

Mbappe, while a native Parisian, has always been drawn to the Spanish giants, who already showed interest in signing him when he was a fresh-faced teenager. Real need a new talisman too. Ronaldo has long since gone while this summer has seen center-backs Ramos and Raphael Varane depart. Their remaining superstar up front, Karim Benzema, will be 34 in December. They are hoping that PSG will be open to offers now, or that Mbappe will run down his contract and join them next season. —AFP



**TROYES, France:** Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe runs with the ball during the French L1 football match between PSG and ES Troyes at the Stade de l'Aube on Aug 7, 2021. —AFP