

## Sports

# Messi injured but Barca seal much-needed win over Villarreal

## Barcelona visit Getafe in La Liga on Saturday

**MADRID:** Lionel Messi endured yet more injury frustration on Tuesday after going off at half-time against Villarreal but Barcelona gave their coach Ernesto Valverde some much-needed relief with a comfortable 2-1 victory.

Messi received treatment in the first half for what looked like a problem with his left thigh and was then unable to continue after the interval, replaced by Ousmane Dembele. His withdrawal will be a major concern for Barca, particularly given this was Messi's first start of the season after just recovering from a niggling calf injury sustained at the start of August.

After the match, Valverde struck a note of calm. "When something happens to Messi, everyone stops, not only on the field, but in the stands as well," he said. "It is a small problem in the adductor and as a precaution we have decided not to risk it. In theory, it is nothing more but we will see tomorrow how it is."

Barcelona visit Getafe in La Liga on Saturday before playing Inter Milan at home in the Champions League four days later. Certainly, they would have been eager to see Messi back in their line-up, having suffered a humbling 2-0 loss at newly-promoted Granada last weekend, a result that left them with seven points from five games, their worst start to a season since 1995.

They arrived at Camp Nou with doubts hovering, particularly over Valverde, but delivered a far more convincing win than the scoreline suggested, thanks to early goals from Antoine Griezmann, his third of the season, and Arthur Melo. "We are still far from our best but with matches everything will improve," said Griezmann.

On his own adaptation at Barcelona, he added: "It's different. A different style of football, a different posi-

tion. I knew it was going to be a challenge and it would take time. "But I'm not too bad, right? Three goals. I can do better, yes, but I have to keep working."

Santi Cazorla put Villarreal in touch on the stroke of half-time but in truth the visitors barely threatened thereafter, with Barcelona impressively composed when nerves might easily have taken over.

It means Valverde's side climb to fourth in the table, one point behind Real Madrid and level on points with Atletico Madrid, who both play later. Villarreal's encouraging start stalls a little as they drop to eighth.

Granada, who backed up their shock win over Barca with a 1-1 draw at Real Valladolid, top the table, although both Athletic Bilbao and Real Madrid can move three points above them when they play their games.

Barcelona started well, with Griezmann heading in after just six minutes, darting to the near post to flick home Messi's floated corner. The pair shared a celebratory hug too. Seven minutes later, there was a second and another goal almost from nothing. Arthur collected the ball 30 yards out and harpooned a shot straight past Sergio Asenjo and into the top right-hand corner.

Messi, who won FIFA's Men's Player of the Year award on Monday, took treatment on the sideline just after the half-hour mark and Cazorla pulled one back soon after with a swerving effort from distance.

The ball straightened as it flew, which fooled goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen, on his way left towards the corner. Dembele replaced Messi and the 16-year-old Ansu Fati came on for Luis Suarez with 12 minutes left. Fati twice went close but shot over and then wide. A third for Barca looked more likely than an equaliser for Villarreal. — AFP



**BARCELONA:** Villarreal's Spanish defender Pau Torres (L) vies with Barcelona's Uruguayan forward Luis Suarez during the Spanish league football match between FC Barcelona and Villarreal CF at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. — AFP

## Salah, Egypt fall out again after vote in FIFA awards goes astray

**CAIRO:** Egypt's football association has asked FIFA for clarification after its vote for national icon Mohamed Salah was dropped from the final tally for the world's best player award.

The results are based on the votes of national coaches, team captains and members of the press in selecting their top three players of the year. When FIFA released its results, Egypt was curiously absent from the final vote count.

In comments online blame was aimed at Egypt's football federation for failing to ensure Salah would be given the maximum chance in all votes, although he eventually finished fourth, 20 votes behind winner Lionel Messi.

Salah hinted at his disappointment through his social media activity, changing his Twitter bio to say he only plays for Liverpool and removing any mention of his affiliation to Egypt. To add insult to injury, Hany Daniel, the Egyptian journalist in the voting, picked Senegalese forward Sadio Mane. Salah's Liverpool team-mate, ahead of the Egyptian striker who he relegated to third place behind Cristiano Ronaldo.

Messi won with 46 votes while Salah scored only 26 in fourth. Salah posted a conciliatory tweet after saying "no matter how much they try to change my love for you and your people", referring to Egypt, "they won't be able to".

Hours after the controversy, the Egyptian Football Association said it had asked FIFA for an explanation about why its vote "was not approved". The statement released late Tuesday said the association had sent its votes officially to FIFA on August 15 and they were registered on August 19. "National team captain Ahmed al-Mohamedy voted while the Olympic team's manager Shawki Ghareeb voted after the resignation of the coaching staff," it added. Egypt's coach Javier Aguirre and the entire board of the association resigned after the country's abysmal showing in this year's Africa Cup of Nations that it hosted.

The Pharaohs were knocked out in the second round by South Africa after being dogged by a lack of preparation and a sexual harassment scandal involving player Amr Warda. Salah and the EFA have butted heads before several times, most prominently when a photo of him was plastered on the squad's plane ahead of the 2018 World Cup, causing sponsorship problems for the star. The EFA has been beset with governance issues and was vehemently pilloried by fans for Egypt's early exit from the Africa Cup of Nations. It was most recently headed by Hani Abou Rida, a powerful FIFA Council member, who was investigated for a massive corruption case that embroiled senior FIFA officials in 2015. — AFP



**BRESCIA:** Juventus' Argentinian forward Gonzalo Higuain (C) and Brescia's Italian defender Andrea Cistana (C-R) go for a header as Juventus' German midfielder Sami Khedira (R) looks on during the Italian Serie A football match Brescia vs Juventus at the Mario-Rigamonti stadium in Brescia. — AFP

## Juventus beat Balotelli's Brescia, go top of Serie A

**MILAN:** Mario Balotelli made his first start for Brescia but the promoted northerners still fell to a 2-1 defeat which sent champions Juventus top of Serie A on Tuesday. Former Manchester City and Inter Milan striker Balotelli has returned to Italy to play for his hometown club, but his debut had been delayed as he sat out a four-game suspension for previous club Marseille.

Juventus were without Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo, rested with a slight thigh problem, but the champions recovered from going behind after less than four minutes to an Alfredo Donnarumma goal — his fourth in five games.

Juventus goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny got two hands to Donnarumma's powerful strike, but could only push the ball into the net. Brescia defender Jhon Chancellor let the champions off the hook five minutes before the break, diverting the ball into his own goal, with Bosnian midfielder Miralem Pjanic completing the comeback, volleying in on 63 minutes.

Juventus overtake Inter Milan at the top of the Serie A table with 13 points from five games. Antonio Conte's side are one point behind before they host Lazio at the San Siro later. "It wasn't easy after going behind within four minutes, but we showed personality," Juventus coach

Maurizio Sarri told DAZN.

Balotelli, back in Italy for the first time since 2016, was denied after half an hour with Polish keeper Szczesny tipping his 30-yard free-kick over the bar. "Mario is working hard and is an extraordinary player. I'm sure he'll give us a big hand this season," said Brescia coach Eugenio Corini.

"Being at home, close to his mother, family and friends is helping him to focus on his life more. His abilities are unlimited." French midfielder Adrien Rabiot also made his first start for Juventus, who lost full-back Danilo to injury early on, since his move from Paris Saint-Germain.

Reeling after going behind, Juventus pushed forward with Gonzalo Higuain threatening for the visitors and Aaron Ramsey nodding over. The equaliser came when Brescia goalkeeper Jesse Joronen shoved a Paulo Dybala corner into Chancellor's path.

Paulo Dybala also forced Joronen into action, with Rabiot pouncing on the rebound which was cleared off the line. Pjanic drilled in the winner after Dybala struck his free-kick into the wall and the Bosnian met the loose ball with a rasping volley.

Federico Bernardeschi came on for Ramsey in the 70th minute, with Dybala making way for Blaise Matuidi ten minutes later with the visitors holding on for all three points. Juventus next play SPAL in Serie A on Saturday before hosting Bayer Leverkusen in the Champions League next Tuesday, having been held to a 2-2 draw against Atletico Madrid in their opener.

Brescia were promoted to Serie A this year, after being relegated in 2011, and sit 12th with six points. Elsewhere, Verona were held to a goalless draw at home against Udinese, with both teams settled in the bottom half of the table with just one win each from five games. — AFP

## Palestinians cancel soccer final after Israel denies Gaza team travel

**GAZA:** The Palestinian national soccer club championship was called off yesterday after Israel denied travel permits to Gaza players who had hoped to face off with their opponents in the occupied West Bank.

Israel refused to let players from Gaza's Khadamat Rafah club travel several dozen kilometres through its territory to play Nablus's FC Balata in the central West Bank. Israeli officials have not given a public explanation of the reasons. Some media reports have quoted Israeli security sources saying team members were believed to have links to terrorism.

Only 12 of the Gaza club's 35 members were granted permits, just five of whom were players, the team said. Yesterday's FIFA-recognised Palestine Cup in the West Bank city of Nablus had already been postponed from July, when 31 of the Gaza club's 35 players were denied permits, the team said.

The winner of yesterday's game between the Gaza and West Bank Cup holders would have represented Palestinians in the Asian Champions League, a qualifier for the FIFA Club World Cup.

"It's a terrible feeling after training so hard," said Ahmad Abu Thuhair, a Gaza footballer whose application was rejected. An Israeli court on Monday upheld a decision from COGAT, Israel's military liaison to the Palestinians, to deny the Gaza players permits.

"Each permit application received by COGAT is individually and thoroughly evaluated, pursuant to the criteria that are published on COGAT's website and subject to security checks," COGAT said in an email, without providing further details. It referred additional questions to the Shin Bet Israeli domestic intelligence service, which did not respond to a request for comment. — Reuters

## FIFA agrees limits to player loans and agent commissions

**ZURICH:** FIFA has agreed steps that will limit the number of players clubs can send out on loan from next season and will also limit the amount of money paid to agents in commissions, world football's governing body announced yesterday.

In a statement, FIFA said it had taken "a series of key steps to protect the integrity of the system and prevent abuses" following a meeting of its Stakeholders Committee. From next season, the number of international loans out and in permitted per club will be limited to eight, with that figure dropping progressively to six by the 2022/23 season. The number of players that can be loaned between the same two clubs will be capped at three.

However, the cap will only be applied to players aged over 21, or "non club-trained" players aged 21 and under. The measures are aimed at curtailing "abusive and excessive practices", with FIFA citing the hoarding of players by clubs and the distortion of competition when teams bring in several players on loan from a bigger club with whom they have a close relationship.

"Players' development is suffering as they are moved from one club to another with no clear career plan. The current loan system has facilitated player hoarding with clubs putting numerous players on their books and then loaning them out to other clubs," FIFA said in a confidential document seen by AFP.

The measures appear to be aimed at clubs such as Chelsea, who have habitually had vast numbers of players out on loan in recent seasons. Monaco have as many as 18 players currently loaned out, including seven at Belgian side Cercle Brugge.

The recommendations will be endorsed at the upcoming FIFA Council meeting in Shanghai, scheduled for October 24. However, they will not immediately apply to domestic loans, with the document stating that member associations will have three years in order to implement rules on a loan system "in line with FIFA principles".

Meanwhile, in an effort to curb the amount of money going out of the game and into the pockets of agents, FIFA stakeholders also agreed to limit commissions as "conflicts of interest plague football's transfer system".

As a result, a selling club will not have to pay more than 10 percent of a transfer fee received to an agent acting on their behalf. Agents representing a player will be entitled to a maximum of three percent of that player's total remuneration and another three percent for representing the buying club.

In 2016, Mino Raiola was paid 27 million euros for his role in Paul Pogba's transfer from Juventus to Manchester United for a then world-record fee of over 100 million euros.

The new measures are designed to limit "financial incentive of agents to engineer a possible transfer" and to create "more transparent and objective forms of remuneration", the document stated.

"Certain measures will certainly not please some agents, but there was a consensus on these measures and there have been discussions going back more than a year," a FIFA official told journalists at the organisation's Zurich headquarters. "This is an important step towards making transfers more moral." The measures will also be endorsed at the FIFA Council in Shanghai. — AFP



Matches on TV  
(Local Timings)

### SPANISH LEAGUE

SD Eibar v Sevilla FC 20:00  
beIN SPORTS HD 3  
Celta de Vigo v RCD Espanyol 21:00  
beIN SPORTS HD 3  
Real Sociedad v Deportivo Alaves 22:00  
beIN SPORTS HD 3

### ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE

Torino FC v AC Milan 22:00  
beIN SPORTS HD 4