

Messi wins FIFA Best prize

Putellas retains women's award • Scaloni claims men's coach honor

PARIS: Lionel Messi won The Best FIFA men's player prize for 2022 on Monday on the back of his World Cup triumph with Argentina and Spain's Alexia Putellas retained the women's award at a ceremony in Paris. Messi beat his Paris Saint-Germain teammate, and World Cup final rival, Kylian Mbappe to the men's gong with Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema having been the other contender to claim the prize.

It is the second time that Messi has won the honor inaugurated by FIFA in 2016 after football's world governing body split from Ballon d'Or organizers France Football. The award, which is voted for by national team coaches and captains, journalists and also fans, recognizes a year in which the former Barcelona star crowned his glorious career by leading Argentina to victory at the World Cup.

Messi scored twice in an epic final in Doha as Argentina beat France on penalties despite Mbappe netting a hat-trick for Les Bleus in a remarkable 3-3 draw. He also claimed the Golden Ball for the best player at the tournament, although Mbappe was the top scorer with eight goals, one more than Messi. "This year was just mad for me, to be able to achieve my dream that I had fought so hard for. In the end I got it and it was the most beautiful thing that has happened in my career," Messi said of his World Cup win as he collected his award.

"It is a dream for every footballer but something that very few can make come true," added Messi,



PARIS: (Left) Spain and Barcelona forward Alexia Putellas poses on stage after receiving the Best FIFA Women's Player award during the Best FIFA Football Awards 2022 ceremony on Feb 27, 2023. (Right) Argentina and Paris Saint-Germain forward Lionel Messi poses on stage after receiving the Best FIFA Men's Player award — AFP

who was sat in the Paris theatre in between Mbappe and his wife Antonella Rocuzzo. He took the prize just 24 hours after combining with Mbappe to lead PSG to a 3-0 win against Marseille in Ligue 1.

Putellas pips Mead and Morgan

The 35-year-old, a seven-time Ballon d'Or winner, succeeds Polish star Robert Lewandowski on the FIFA honors list, while Putellas retained the women's prize despite spending the second half of last year out injured. The 29-year-old beat England's European Championship-winning striker Beth Mead and United States star Alex Morgan to add the FIFA crown to the Ballon d'Or, which she has also won two years running.

Putellas is currently recovering from a serious knee injury suffered last July which ruled her out of the Euro in England with Spain. Prior to that she had scored 11 goals on Barcelona's run to the Champions League final, which they lost to Lyon. Putellas has previously said she hopes to return from injury in time to play again this season, but it remains to be seen whether she will feature for Spain at the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand in July and August. Argentina's World Cup win in Qatar was also recognized as Lionel Scaloni claimed the men's coach's honor and Emiliano Martinez was named the best male goalkeeper.

Meanwhile, England's European Championship victory helped their Dutch manager Sarina Wiegman win the prize for best women's coach, while Mary Earps was named the women's goalkeeper of the year. Polish amputee player Marcin Oleksy took the Puskas Award for best goal, named after Hungary great Ferenc Puskas. — AFP



Philippe Diallo

Scandal-hit French football chief Noel Le Graet quits

PARIS: French Football Federation president Noel Le Graet resigned on Tuesday following accusations of sexual and psychological harassment, bringing to an end more than a decade in charge. The 81-year-old's time at the helm had coincided with the revival of the French men's national team as a force, with their victory at the 2018 World Cup followed by a run to last year's final in Qatar, which they lost on penalties to Argentina.

But Le Graet's resignation comes 13 days after the publication of a damning report into management practices at the Paris-based FFF which had been commissioned by the sports ministry. "Considering his conduct towards women, his public comments and the governance failings of the FFF, Mr Le Graet no longer has the necessary legitimacy to run and represent French football," the report said.

Le Graet had already agreed in January to step down pending the outcome of the audit, which concluded that he should not return to the role because his "behavioral excesses are incompatible with the carrying out of his functions". It was revealed last month that Le Graet, whose mandate was due to run until 2024, was being investigated for sexual and psychological harassment following allegations made by a female football agent, Sonia Souid.

He was already under pressure after making dismissive remarks in a radio interview in early January about France legend Zinedine Zidane's potential interest in coaching the national team. That was after long-serving coach Didier Deschamps had his contract extended until 2026. "I wouldn't even have taken his call," Le Graet told RMC radio when asked about Zidane.

Le Graet announced his departure at an executive committee meeting of the federation on Tuesday, with members of the committee telling



Noel Le Graet

AFP that Philippe Diallo would remain in the role of interim president. Diallo, a federation vice-president who had initially moved up to fill in for Le Graet when he first stepped aside in January, is expected to remain in charge at least until a permanent successor is voted for in June.

"The FFF recognizes the remarkable sporting and economic performance of Noel Le Graet," the federation said in a statement, before hitting out at the authors of the audit. "The report does not mention any systematic failing," it added. "The FFF nevertheless notes that the report is based less on objective facts than on comments that have sometimes led to exaggerated bad-mouthing of the body."

Pressure on women's coach Diacre

Le Graet, a former socialist mayor of the small Brittany town of Guingamp, oversaw the rise of the local football team that became a top-flight force during his time as club president. He then became president of the FFF in 2011, at a time when the French game was reeling in the wake of the national team's disastrous showing at the 2010 World Cup, when the players went on strike. Le Graet oversaw the appointment of Deschamps as coach in 2012, and France reached the Euro 2016 final as hosts before their back-to-back World Cup final appearances.

He also oversaw France's successful hosting of the 2019 Women's World Cup. "He is a great leader. This federation is one of the best-run federations," insisted the veteran Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas, an influential member of the FFF executive committee, on Tuesday. However, Le Graet's departure also comes amid a deepening crisis within the French women's team.

Several star players, led by captain Wendie Renard, last week announced that they would no longer play for France under the current set-up, with just five months to go until the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand. That has placed the future of coach Corinne Diacre, who had the backing of Le Graet, in serious doubt. Speaking on Tuesday, the federation's interim chief Diallo said a decision on Diacre's future would be taken "very soon". — AFP

Randle, Quickley shine as Knicks sink Celtics

NEW YORK: Julius Randle and Immanuel Quickley combined for 46 points as the in-form New York Knicks upset the Boston Celtics 109-94 in the NBA on Monday. Randle and Quickley finished with 23 points each as the impressive Knicks extended their winning streak to six games at Madison Square Garden. The New York victory bumped the Celtics out of the top spot in the Eastern Conference standings, lifting the Milwaukee Bucks into first place.

Six Knicks players finished the game in double figures after New York took control of the contest early on to lead almost from start to finish. The Knicks moved up to fifth place in the East after the win. New York pulled 20 points clear midway through the second quarter and retained a comfortable advantage throughout. A miserable night for Boston ended with Jayson Tatum being ejected with four minutes remaining for a second technical foul. Tatum - the hero of Boston's pulsating victory over Philadelphia on Saturday - endured a frustrating outing, making just six-of-18 from the field. Malcolm Brogdon led the Boston scorers with 22 points.

Elsewhere on Monday, Jimmy Butler scored 23 points as the Miami Heat sent the Philadelphia 76ers spinning to a second straight defeat with a 101-99 victory on the road. A superb defensive effort from Miami saw the potent Sixers offense - which has been averaging 114 points this season - restricted to fewer than 100 points.

At the other end, Butler provided offensive guile and came up clutch in the final two minutes, giving

Miami a 100-99 lead with a remarkable driving reverse layup shortly before drawing a foul and two free throws that put the Heat into a winning position. In addition to his 23 points, Butler finished with 11 rebounds, nine assists and four steals.

Taking a stand

Four other Miami players finished in double figures, with Gabe Vincent adding 14 points while Max Strus and Bam Adebayo chipped in with 13 points apiece. The victory was a welcome return to form for Miami, who were beaten by the lowly Charlotte Hornets on Saturday after being routed by Milwaukee on Friday. "Things don't always go your way in this league and it's about how you respond collectively when you have some disappointments," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "We were all disappointed about the last two games, and at some point you just have to take a stand, figure it out and get out a win."

The Sixers meanwhile were left reeling a lackluster first-half display that left them chasing the game throughout. Joel Embiid led the Philadelphia scorers with 27 points while Tyrese Maxey scored 23 and James Harden 20. Sixers coach Doc Rivers said his team had shown signs of weariness after roller coaster games against Boston and Memphis last week. "We were flat in the first half," Rivers said. "We had two games with a lot of energy and you could just feel it really. The way we looked at it early on was 'Let's just try and get to half-time.' I just thought we were really sloppy tonight, sluggish. It happens. But in those close games, you've still got to find a way to win. And tonight we didn't."

Miami improved to 33-29 with the victory while the third-placed Sixers slipped to 39-21. In other games on Monday, the Charlotte Hornets defeated the Detroit Pistons 117-106 in a battle of the bottom two clubs in the Eastern Conference. Charlotte's victory was overshadowed by an injury to star guard LaMelo Ball, who left the game after suffering a fractured right ankle. — AFP



NEW YORK: Julius Randle of the New York Knicks goes to the basket as Mike Muscala of the Boston Celtics at Madison Square Garden on Feb 27, 2023. — AFP