

Sports

Messi mission on course after masterclass against Lyon

Big players like Leo and Cristiano, they give you so much: Pique

BARCELONA: Lionel Messi pledged at the start of the season to bring “that beautiful cup” back to the Camp Nou and on the evidence of Wednesday night, few would bet against him. Barcelona’s 5-1 thrashing of Lyon in their Champions League last 16 second leg, a score that overlooked a nervy spell in the second half when the visitors were a goal from going through, in the end, was all about him. Messi scored twice, including once from the penalty spot, although it was no ordinary spot-kick, instead a delightful chip that hung in the air and plopped perfectly down the middle. There was a pair of assists too, for Gerard Pique and Ousmane Dembele, during a three-goal flurry in the final 12 minutes, with Messi leaving Lyon defenders sprawled to add a second of his own.

“Almost everything went through Messi,” said Lyon coach Bruno Genesio, whose team had held Barcelona to a 0-0 draw in the first leg. “When he is at that kind of level he is almost unstoppable. We did what we could.”

They restricted him to two goals, one short of Cristiano Ronaldo’s hat-trick that had sent Juventus through and Atletico Madrid crashing out in Turin on Tuesday. Messi paid tribute. “Cristiano had a magical night,” he said.

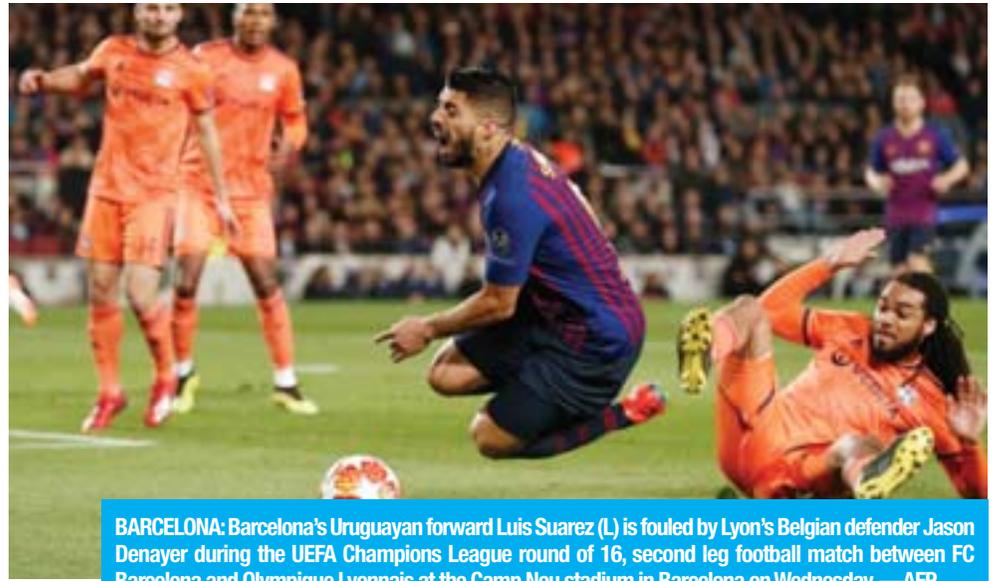
The talk has been of a changing of the guard, after Real Madrid’s European hegemony was ended by Ajax, and a new era, with Spain having only one side in the Champions League quarter-

finals for the first time since 2010.

But Messi and Ronaldo remain constant, the former now on 108 goals in the competition, behind the latter’s imperious 124. Each still has the power to settle a tie on their own and those most ardent in the debate about who is greater might be hoping for a Barca-Juve showdown when the draw for the quarter-finals is made on Friday. “Big players like Leo and Cristiano, they give you so much,” said Pique. “Not just in results. Having Leo on your team makes you feel like you can face anything.” Certainly, Barca will be amongst the two or three opponents that clubs will be keenest to avoid, with only Manchester City and perhaps Juve, because of Ronaldo, carrying the same sense of power and momentum. Ernesto Valverde’s team are not without weaknesses. Their defence, as proven against Lyon, is always susceptible while teams like Real Betis, Sevilla and Levante have laid a template for success in recent months, using speed on the counter-attack.

But with a seven-point lead in La Liga, Valverde can afford to keep his players fresh while last year’s collapse against Roma in the Champions League quarter-finals should mean complacency is out of the question.

For Barcelona, domestic dominance has become the norm, meaning the Champions League is what will define their season, however unfair that assessment might be. “From all over Spain,



BARCELONA: Barcelona’s Uruguayan forward Luis Suarez (L) is fouled by Lyon’s Belgian defender Jason Denayer during the UEFA Champions League round of 16, second leg football match between FC Barcelona and Olympique Lyonnais at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona on Wednesday. —AFP

this team is given little credit for what we do,” said Jordi Alba on Wednesday. “The team has been consistent in all the competitions but the Champions League is decided by fine margins. We will try to do better.”

Messi perhaps feels that urge more than most and the 31-year-old, who has won the

competition four times but only once since 2011, is playing like a man on a mission. “We are all extremely focused for this competition and Leo too,” Valverde said. “He played an incredible match, extraordinary. He made assists, scored goals, won the ball back. “We are used to him, but somehow he always surprises us.” —AFP

‘Fake’ coaches, fixers undermine China’s football ambitions

SHANGHAI: Rapacious middlemen and coaches with forged or few qualifications are trying their luck in China’s fast-growing grassroots football, imperilling its ambitions to become a major force in the sport, insiders warn. At the behest of football-fan President Xi Jinping, for whom it is a soft-power tool, the world’s second-biggest economy is throwing resources at the game domestically.

Central to that is getting more youngsters to play at schools, clubs and academies. The education ministry plans to have 50,000 “schools characterised by soccer” by 2025. But five people involved in youth football in the country told AFP they had encountered coaches with counterfeit certificates. Just being from overseas was sometimes enough to get work, many involved in the scene said, as so-called coaches-Chinese and foreign-rush for a share of the money swilling around football in China.

Former international forward Xie Hui, now an assistant coach at Chinese Super League (CSL) champions Shanghai SIPG, said there was “a huge problem” with youth coaching. “Even if you give them Wu Lei, they will erase (his talent), that’s the reality,” the 44-year-old told AFP, referring to the Chinese forward who recently left

SIPG for Spain’s Espanyol.

“Nothing has (improved) in 20 years because there is no building (effective structure). It’s almost a desert of youth football education.” Despite a population of 1.4 billion China have qualified for the World Cup only once, in 2002, when they exited without a point or even a goal.

President Xi’s government is pouring money into youth football, but Xie said it was often going to waste. He alleged that some schools were even making up results without playing matches. One well-qualified coach, who did not want to be identified because he was not authorised to talk to media, said there was a “free-for-all” and bemoaned how unscrupulous coaches were giving the rest a bad name.

Mario Castro, who holds a UEFA B licence from the Portuguese football federation, paints a similarly bleak picture. “We have three huge problems in China: the fake coach, the unqualified coach and the coach without knowledge,” said Castro, who has worked in China since 2016 and is technical director at a Shenzhen-based tie-up with top-tier French club Toulouse.

“In the small cities the academy or company needs a foreign face, even if the coach doesn’t have a degree or UEFA certification. “In the big cities there is a huge market in part-time coaching and most of the coaches don’t have a certificate to be a coach or work with children because it is very difficult to find a real coach to work only a few hours per week.”

The Chinese Football Association (CFA) declined to comment on the situation when approached by AFP. But the organisation last month issued a set of rules in an effort to regulate the chaotic coaching market—a tacit admission that a problem exists. —AFP

Southgate rules out England exit before Euro 2020

LONDON: Gareth Southgate has no plans to leave the England job before Euro 2020 but admits his future is uncertain after that. Southgate led England to their first World Cup semi-final appearance since 1990 during a memorable run in Russia last year.

That was a huge boost to his reputation and England’s progress to the inaugural Nations League Finals later this year is another feather in his cap. The 48-year-old was linked with Manchester United before Ole Gunnar Solskjaer’s remarkable impact as interim boss effectively took him out of contention for the Old Trafford post.

But Southgate, whose contract runs until 2022, said he would not have walked out on the chance to manage England in a major tournament on home soil, with several matches in Euro 2020 being staged at Wembley.

“Well, first and foremost, I love the job I’m in,” Southgate said when asked about the link to United. “I’m proud to be England manager. We’ve got a second semi-final coming this summer and a Euros at home—well, I say at home, the group stage is at home—so there is no way I’d be walking away from this.”

Southgate was less definitive when the

question of his long-term future came up, hinting he would like another crack at a big club job after his disappointing spell as Middlesbrough boss. “After those Euros, people might want me or might not want me, here or somewhere else,” he said.

“You can’t look too far ahead in football. You’re quite right, I’m contracted to 2022 — or whenever that World Cup will finish. I don’t look any further than that. “I’m sure at some point in my life, I’ll want to go back to club football because people will say, ‘oh well he did OK as an international manager, but he didn’t work as a club manager’.

“How could you when you step out the dressing room? What do you know, really, two years into your coaching career? “I think at this point, at some stage in the distant future, I would want to do that, but I actually don’t know, because there might be something else more important in my life and I might be doing something completely different. I think it’s too hard.” Southgate has not worked as a club boss since being sacked by Middlesbrough soon after their 2009 relegation from the Premier League.

Aware of the unpredictability of management, the former England, Crystal Palace, Aston Villa and Middlesbrough defender does not have a clear plan for his next move yet. “I’ve never quite understood in this game, people who have a coaching plan or a plan of where they want to go because I didn’t expect to be manager of Middlesbrough two days before I got offered it,” he added. “I didn’t expect to be England senior manager six hours before I was offered it.” —AFP