

# Messi fit for Barca: Valverde

Lionel Messi cut his nose in a challenge with Chris Smalling during the first leg at Old Trafford

AFP | Barcelona, Spain

Barcelona coach Ernesto Valverde has said Lionel Messi is in “perfect” condition to face Manchester United in the second leg of their Champions League quarter-final on Wednesday.

It is four years since Barca last reached the semis of Europe’s premier competition but a 1-0 victory at Old Trafford makes them firm favourites ahead of the return at Camp Nou.

Messi was among 10 players rested for the goalless draw against Huesca on Saturday after a hefty challenge from Chris Smalling last week left him with a swollen nose and cheek.

“He is fine,” said Valverde at a press conference on Tuesday. “He has recovered perfectly from the blow he suffered. He was fine after a couple of days.

“It is true that during the match he was a little stunned but he is in perfect condition and does not have any problems ahead of tomorrow’s game.”

Valverde said Ousmane Dembele could also feature after he played for 67 minutes against Huesca, having recovered from a hamstring injury. “I don’t know to what extent because he has been out for four weeks,” Valverde said. “But he is ready to play.”

Barcelona have lost only one home game in the Champions League in 10 years but United will take hope from their last 16 comeback against Paris Saint-Germain, when they overturned a 2-0 first-leg defeat to go through.

“That memory from PSG will help the players and us as a team, that we know we can turn things around,” coach Ole



Manchester United's English midfielder Scott McTominay (L) vies with Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi

Gunnar Solskjaer said.

“Barcelona here at the Nou Camp is a difficult prospect but the memory will live with the players, it’s not long ago.”

Barca goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen is confident his team can avoid a repeat. “The good thing is we play differently to PSG,” he said. “But United are dangerous and the result from the first leg is dangerous, it is a very small

advantage.”

## Ole Back to Barca

Solskjaer might also draw upon his own experience of the Camp Nou, in 1999, when he scored a 93rd-minute winner as United came from 1-0 down to beat Bayern Munich 2-1 in the Champions League final.

“Of course it’s a fantastic memory for

me. It’s the only time I’ve been on the pitch here,” Solskjaer said.

“I don’t mind if we score in the 93rd minute. If we get to injury-time we are a fit team.”

Barcelona’s recent history in this competition has been more painful as United look to follow Juventus, Atletico Madrid and Roma in sending them out in the quarter-finals for a fourth year



Ole Gunnar Solskjaer scored a last-minute goal to win the Champions League as a Manchester United player at Barcelona’s Camp Nou in 1999

in a row.

“It has been hard,” said Ter Stegen. “We are another year older and we want to make sure it doesn’t happen again. We have to take those losses into account and use them to move forward.”

Valverde urged his players to seize the opportunity. “I think we all take examples of things happening in the past and use them to spur us on,” he said. “That’s fine but I prefer to take charge of your own destiny. You won’t be given something that falls from the sky. We have to earn it.”

United’s greatest threat in recent weeks has tended to come on the counter-attack but Solskjaer insists they cannot afford to sit back.

“There are freak results against Barcelona when you have 10 or 15 per cent possession and they don’t win but normally they do win,” Solskjaer said. “We need to stamp our authority on the game.”

## India go for ‘big match’ experience in World Cup picks



India's batsman Dinesh Karthik attempts to hit a shot (file photo)

AFP | Mumbai

India yesterday named a tried and tested squad for the World Cup led by Virat Kohli with selectors going for experience in all the slots for the marquee 50-over event.

Dinesh Karthik, 33, was given the second wicketkeeper’s slot over rising 21-year-old star Rishabh Pant, ending days of speculation over the role.

Vijay Shankar’s inclusion means he will probably be the first choice number four batsman, a position which India has struggled to fill permanently.

Karthik has not been on form in recent games, but selectors said they value his performance under pressure over the years.

“Definitely it’s a case where we debated at length. We went ahead with Karthik because of his experience in big matches,” chief selector M.S.K. Prasad told a news conference.

“We have seen Karthik fin-

ishing matches under pressure. Pant is full of talent, there’s a lot of time for him and it’s just unfortunate that he has missed out.”

Karthik was part of the Indian squad for the 2007 World Cup but was overlooked for 2011 and 2015.

The selectors however made it clear that former India skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni, 37, would remain first-choice wicketkeeper.

“In an important game, wicketkeeping is also important. Karthik will only play in case of an injury to Dhoni,” Prasad said.

India squad:

Virat Kohli (capt), Rohit Sharma, Shikhar Dhawan, K.L. Rahul, Vijay Shankar, Mahendra Singh Dhoni (wk), Kedar Jadhav, Dinesh Karthik, Yuzvendra Chahal, Kuldeep Yadav, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Jasprit Bumrah, Hardik Pandya, Ravindra Jadeja, Mohammed Shami.

## Bayern’s title hopes hit as Neuer out for two weeks with calf injury

AFP | Berlin

Bayern Munich have suffered a blow to their league title hopes with club captain and Germany goalkeeper Manuel Neuer out for the next two weeks with a calf injury.

The defending Bundesliga champions confirmed Neuer, 33, will be sidelined for “around 14 days” after going off injured during Sunday’s win over Fortuna Duesseldorf.

With five league games left, leaders Bayern are just a point ahead of Borussia Dortmund with the Bavarian giants on

course for a seventh straight league title.

The injury-prone Neuer will miss at least their next two league games as reserve keeper Sven Ulreich steps up.

Neuer picked up the injury early in the first half of Bayern’s 4-1 win, pulling up after making an apparently innocuous pass.

Head coach Niko Kovac has confirmed Neuer has the same calf problem which saw the shot-stopper miss two games earlier this month.

He will definitely miss the league match at home to resurgent Werder Bremen on Satur-

day, as well as next Wednesday’s away German Cup semi-final, also against Bremen, followed by a league match at Nuremberg.

Neuer has faced an ongoing battle with injury in recent years. Two metatarsal fractures kept him sidelined for most of last season, while injuries to his finger and his calf have seen him miss games this term.

Bayern have said defender Mats Hummels will also take a “short break from training” after also suffering a mild leg knock.



Manuel Neuer

## Nadal enters the unknown in Monte Carlo

TDT | Monte Carlo

Rafael Nadal offered a low-key appraisal yesterday of his chances for a record-extending 12th Monte Carlo Masters title as he prepares to return from his latest injury lay-off.

The 32-year-old Spaniard, whose bad knees and constant stoppages from competition have defined his career

as king of clay, was extremely hesitant to even rate his chances as he gets set to face Roberto Bautista Agut in Wednesday’s second round start.

“I can’t give you any feeling, it’s been a rough year and a half for me,” Nadal said ahead of his first match since withdrawing with another knee injury prior to an Indian Wells semi-final against Roger Federer last month.

“It’s tough for me to get a clear view of how I am. It’s all hard for me personally.”

Nadal has a vast number of ranking points to defend on clay after lifting titles in a spectacular 2018 run at Monte Carlo, Barcelona, Rome and Roland

Garros.

His only other trophy during a season in which he did not play at all after the US Open came on hard court in Toronto, where he beat young gun Stefanos Tsitsipas in the final.

“It’s been hard for me personally,” Nadal said of his latest physical setback.

“Now the work of every day is to improve, (make) small improvements in every practice.

“It’s important for me to have a good practice before the tournament starts and then try to be competitive for the first round.

“It’s gonna be a tough one (match with Bautista Agut), so let’s see.”



Rafael Nadal

Nadal is seeded second here behind Novak Djokovic, who is hoping to build for the French Open as he attempts to complete a personal sweep by winning his fourth straight Grand Slam title.