

# Messi penalty lifts Barca

Griezmann overtakes Torres on Atletico Madrid's top-scorer list as they beat Rayo

● **Barcelona beat Valladolid to go seven points clear in Spain**

AFP | Madrid

Lionel Messi scored a penalty and missed another as La Liga leaders Barcelona ground out an unconvincing 1-0 win over Real Valladolid, while Antoine Griezmann surpassed Fernando Torres with his 130th goal for Atletico Madrid.

Messi's fitness was again in the spotlight on Saturday after a niggling thigh strain in recent weeks, but he completed the full 90 minutes at the Camp Nou and hit the 30-goal mark at Barcelona for the 11th straight season.

The Argentine coolly dispatched a spot-kick just before half-time, drilling beyond the reach of Jordi Masip after Gerard Pique was bundled to the ground by Valladolid midfielder Michel.

Masip brilliantly tipped over a Messi volley soon after the interval and Luis Suarez wasted a huge opportunity to double the lead shortly after replacing Kevin-Prince Boateng with an hour gone.

Messi found himself booked for dissent after an apparent foul on him went unpunished, and he



Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi shoots a penalty kick

then blew the chance to kill off Valladolid when Masip kept out his second penalty of the night -- awarded following a trip on Philippe Coutinho.

The excellent Masip alertly gathered Messi's follow-up header and again denied Suarez late on as Barca pulled seven points clear of Atletico ahead of their trip to Lyon in the Champions League last 16.

"We haven't played well. The truth is it wasn't a good match

today. The only good thing is the victory," Pique, who made his 300th appearance in La Liga told Movistar.

"Getting back on track with three points is important after two draws in the league. But we definitely have to improve. We have to be better on Tuesday otherwise we'll have a tough time."

**'Extraordinary player'**

Griezmann scored a sec-

ond-half winner in Atletico's 1-0 victory at neighbours Rayo Vallecano to provide a timely boost going into next week's showdown with Cristiano Ronaldo and Juventus.

The French forward surpassed Torres -- now playing for Sagan Tosu in Japan -- for fifth all-time on the Atletico goalscoring charts as they shook off two successive defeats, including last week's 3-1 loss at home to Real Madrid.

130

goals have been scored by Antoine Griezmann for Atletico Madrid

Griezmann struck for the tenth time in his last 11 outings, forcing home from six yards on 74 minutes after Alvaro Morata laid off a high, looping ball inside the area.

"Griezmann is an extraordinary player, he always adapts to what the team needs. He's very important for us," Atletico coach Diego Simeone said.

The late Luis Aragones, who coached Spain to the European Championship title in 2008, is Atletico's record goalscorer with 172.

"It's always tough at this stadium. We started off well and we had chances in the first 15 minutes such as Saul's header, but then they improved," Simeone added.

"Our second half substitutions gave us more offensive strength and that allowed us to get our goal. It was a very tough match."

## Neymar's father denies any contact with Barca over return

AFP | Paris

Neymar's father reiterated yesterday that there has been no attempt to contact Barcelona over a possible return to Spain for the world's most expensive player.

Neymar joined Paris Saint-Germain for a world record fee of 222 million euros (\$251 million) in August 2017 but has repeatedly been linked with a move back to Barcelona.

"Barca are a huge club, we were very happy over there," Neymar Sr told TFI yesterday. "It's impossible to leave a player like him out of these (transfer market) rumours. But it's a lie, there hasn't been a call with Barca."

"There are two people who speak for Neymar: himself and me. Neither of us has spoken about this intention to return to Barcelona," he added.

"These rumours amuse us a lot. These journalists are funny. The future is in Paris, the present is in Paris."

Neymar Sr took to social media last month to brand a report in Spain which claimed he had begged Barca to resign his son from PSG as "fake news".

The Brazilian forward is currently on the sidelines after he was ruled out for 10 weeks with a metatarsal injury suffered in a French Cup win over Strasbourg on January 23.

PSG hope the 27-year-old, who suffered a fracture to the same right foot at the end of February last year, will be back in time for a potential Champi-

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NEYMAR SR

ons League quarter-final.

The French club hold a 2-0 lead over Manchester United ahead of the return leg at the Parc des Princes in their last-16 tie.

Neymar Sr also called on referees in France to offer his son more protection.

"It's not the French league that is the problem, it's the referees who must protect the players," he said.



Neymar

## Schnur's dream run continues, Opelka outguns Isner

AFP | Manama

Canadian qualifier Brayden Schnur punched his ticket to the ATP New York Open final by outlasting US journeyman Sam Querrey 7-6 (9/7), 4-6, 6-3 on Saturday.

Schnur, a 23-year-old from Montreal ranked 154th in the world, defeated 10-time ATP title-winner Querrey in one hour and 54 minutes in the semi-finals.

He will try to complete a fairy-tale championship run yesterday against American Reilly Opelka, who outgunned top seed John Isner in three sets 6-7 (8/10), 7-6 (16/14), 7-6 (7/4) in the other semi-final.

The all-American showdown



Sam Querrey hits a return

set a Tour record for the most combined aces in a three set match with 81. The previous record was 71 set by Nick Kyrgios and Ryan Harrison earlier this year in Brisbane.

Schnur, the last alternate in the qualifying draw, had been winless in five career tour-level matches.

World number 49 Querrey, 31, was in his first ATP semi-final since last year in New York, when he lost to South African Kevin Anderson in the final.

Schnur denied Querrey's first four break chances on set points in the 10th game then held to 5-5 on his fifth ace of the match as they battled into a tie-breaker.

Querrey double faulted to 4-4 and Schnur grabbed three set points before finally breaking through to claim the first set after 53 minutes.

Schnur broke Querrey in the second game of the second set on the way to a 3-0 lead, but the US veteran roared back to win six of the next seven games and force a third set.

## BIC joins in on Sports Day festivities

TDT | Manama

Bahrain International Circuit (BIC) took part in Bahrain's National Sports Day festivities last week.

BIC hosted several activities at its Sakhir premises to mark the occasion. Dozens of staff members and guests took part. For women, the activities included yoga, cycling, a marathon, and a walkathon.

Meanwhile, held in cooperation with the Bahrain Motor Federation, there was also plenty of action in

AutoCross held at BIC's car park, as well as in karting at Bahrain International Karting Cir-



Participants ride cycles at the BIC

cuit.

Bahrain's National Sports Day was organised by various sporting institutions across the nation in compliance with the decision of the Presidents of National Olympics Committees in the GCC, who agreed to hold

such an event on the second week of February in all GCC countries.

Bahrain's National Sports Day is now held every year and spearheaded by the BOC, it seeks to activate the noble Olympic principles.

## BBK junior tennis ends today

TDT | Manama

The final matches and the closing ceremony of 24th BBK Juniors Open Tennis Championship 2019, held under the patronage of Reyadh Sater (BBK's Chief Executive) and organized by Bahrain Tennis Club, will be held today.

The final in the Unisex Under 8 Category between Mohamed Al Khadem (KSA) and Isak Texmo (SWE) will be held at 4pm at Mini Court. The Under 14 Boys Singles Final will also be held at the same time.

The final in the Unisex Under 10 between Hashim Al Tobli (BRN) and Ahmed Al Sayed (BRN) will be held at Center Court at 5pm.

## Umtiti set for return against Lyon

AFP | Barcelona

Samuel Umtiti is set to make his long-awaited return from injury after Barcelona named him in the squad yesterday to face Lyon in the Champions League.

A knee problem has caused Umtiti to play only once in almost five months but the defender resumed training at the end of January and has been included in Barca's squad for the trip to Lyon on Tuesday.

Umtiti is unlikely to start the first leg against his former club but his availability is a plus for coach Ernesto Valverde, with difficult fixtures to come.

After Lyon, Barcelona face a trip to Sevilla in La Liga before two Clasicos in four days, the first in the Copa del Rey and the second in the league, both at the Santiago Bernabeu.

## Cardiff considering legal action against Nantes over Sala 'negligence'

AFP | London

Cardiff City could launch a negligence claim against Nantes as soon as next week if an official report finds Emiliano Sala was flown to his death by a pilot who did not have the correct licence, according to Britain's Sunday Telegraph.

Premier League side Cardiff already find themselves involved in a legal dispute with French side Nantes over whether they are contractually obliged to pay a transfer fee for the Argentinian striker, who died without playing a game for the Welsh side.

Sala had signed for Cardiff for a club record £15 million (\$19 million) and was flying to his new team from former side Nantes in France when his plane went missing over the Channel on January 21.

The wreckage was located on the seabed. Sala's body was recovered but pilot David Ibbotson is still missing. The aircraft remains under the sea.