

Laporta's new Barca chapter begins with Newcastle clash

Re-elected president begins new term aiming to restore Barcelona's European dominance

● Laporta targets Champions League success

● Last Champions League title in 2015

● Camp Nou rebuild progresses

AFP | Barcelona

Cava was flowing before the votes had even begun to be counted, and it was spilling everywhere when the counting was done, and long after that too, Barcelona's president reelect Joan Laporta exuberantly shaking a bottle of it in the early hours of Monday morning in his beloved party venue Luz de Gas.

The battle was over, rival election candidate Victor Font dispatched with consummate ease, but now the real fight begins -- with Laporta desperate to propel Barcelona back to the European throne.

Newcastle visit on Wednesday in the Champions League last 16, the tie delicately poised after a 1-1 draw on Tyneside last week, Eddie Howe's men underdogs but posing a clear threat to Laporta's dream as shown by their strong first leg display.

If the last five years were about bringing Barcelona back from the ICU, as he put it after



Barcelona's Brazilian forward #11 Raphinha celebrates scoring (file photo)

inheriting a tower of debt, then the next five must build on the platform they have created.

Should the Catalan giants go one better than last season, when they reached the semi-finals for the first time in six years, and then triumph in Budapest, theoretically Laporta wouldn't even be the president yet.

His second consecutive mandate -- and fourth in total, having led the club from 2003-2010 -- begins in July, with temporary chief Rafa Yuste in charge until then.

"If Yuste wins this Champions League, it will be wonderful, he is like a brother to me," said Laporta.

However the reality is charismatic 63-year-old Laporta will be pulling the strings, as he did on Sunday's election day, zealously greeting famous faces from the club's past who turned up to vote.

Sergio Busquets was one of them, with the defensive midfielder part of three Champions League triumphs with Barcelona, in 2009, 2011 and 2015.

The latter of those was the last time Barca lifted the trophy, over a decade ago, with all-time great Lionel Messi still at the club, just a few months after taking charge in 2021 was a black mark on Laporta's presidency.

There was plenty to criticise, with the return to the club's partially rebuilt Camp Nou home delayed by a year, and registration issues with Dani Olmo's

contract embarrassing the club. Many feared Laporta's decision to activate the 'palancas' -- financial levers -- would send the club to ruin, selling off future television rights and parts of the club for an immediate cash injection.



Despite the celebration, Laporta's official term doesn't actually begin until July; his close ally Rafa Yuste will serve as temporary chief while Laporta continues to pull the strings behind the scenes

'Best years of our lives'

However the approach worked, at least in the short term. Laporta and his sporting director Deco bet the house on Robert Lewandowski, Raphinha, and Jules Kounde, trying to power Barca back to the elite, and in time the deals paid off.

Most importantly, the duo turned to Hansi Flick. That was a gamble too, on the former Bayern Munich coach, but Flick's thrilling attacking football en-

tertained fans and has proven successful.

It led the team to a domestic treble last season, and the final four in Europe where they fell short against Inter Milan.

Flick's side were defensively weak, and that still appears to be the case, with Newcastle aiming to get in behind their high line to cause an upset in Catalonia.

However in teenage winger Lamine Yamal and midfielder Pedri Gonzalez, Barca have arguably the best two players in their positions in the world.

"We are going to live the best years of our lives these next five years," pledged Laporta after his victory, a sizable claim considering he also oversaw the arrival of Ronaldinho, the emergence of Messi and Pep Guardiola's treble-winning campaign in 2009.

With Camp Nou now able to house nearly 63,000 fans, and a planned capacity of 105,000, Laporta believes Barca's finances are now in a healthier position to compete with clubs funded by Gulf states, including Saudi Arabian owned Newcastle.

"No one can stop us," added a jubilant Laporta before heading into the Barcelona night, although 11 years of misery in Europe hints the Catalans are sometimes capable of stopping themselves.

The Maggies' visit gives Barca the chance to begin Laporta's new era with a bang, with a Champions League quarter-final place beckoning.

Former tennis world number 39 banned for doping



Australian player turned coach Marinko Matosevic in action (file photo)

AFP | Sydney

Australian tennis player turned coach Marinko Matosevic was slapped with a four-year ban yesterday for breaching anti-doping rules between 2018 and 2020.

The former world number 39, who most recently helped coach current Australian players Chris O'Connell and Jordan Thompson, initially denied all charges.

But he admitted to blood doping in comments shortly before the hearing was scheduled to take place, the International Tennis Integrity Agency

(ITIA) said.

An independent tribunal found he committed five anti-doping rule violations.

They included "use of a prohibited method through blood doping and facilitating another player to blood dope".

He also "provided advice to others on how to avoid positive tests, and use and possession of the prohibited substance clenbuterol".

Clenbuterol, a medication prescribed for treating asthma and other breathing difficulties, is sometimes misused by bodybuilders and athletes as an off-label performance enhancer.

Iran 'negotiating' with FIFA over moving World Cup games to Mexico: embassy

AFP | London

Iran's football federation is "negotiating" with FIFA to relocate the country's first-round matches at the World Cup to Mexico from the United States, citing the conflict in the Middle East, Iran's embassy in Mexico said.

Iran's participation at this summer's finals in the United States, Canada and Mexico has been thrown into doubt since the war began late last month.

"When (US President Donald) Trump has explicitly stated that he cannot ensure the security of the Iranian national team, we will certainly not travel to America," Iranian football chief Mehdi Taj said in remarks posted on the embassy's X account.

"We are currently negotiating with FIFA to hold Iran's matches in the World Cup in Mexico."

Iran are scheduled to face New Zealand and Belgium in Los Angeles, followed by Egypt in Seattle.

The team's base camp for the tournament is currently slated to be located in Tucson, Arizona.



The official World Cup trophy is displayed during its presentation within the FIFA World Cup 2026 Trophy Tour in Mexico

Abolfazl Pasandideh, Iran's ambassador to Mexico, on Monday denounced "the US government's lack of cooperation regarding visa issuance and the provision of logistical support" for the Iranian delegation ahead of the World Cup, in a statement published on the embassy's website.

He added that he had also "suggested to FIFA that Iran's matches be moved from the United States to Mexico."

FIFA did not immediately respond to a request for comment from AFP.

Trump triggered uproar last week after stating that while Iran's football team would be "welcome" in the United States, they should not travel to the tournament "for their own life and safety."

Trump's comments came after FIFA president Gianni Infantino had given assurances that Trump had promised him

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IRANIAN FOOTBALL CHIEF MEHDI TAJ

that the Iranian team would be welcome.

Iran hit back at Trump's comments saying "no one can exclude Iran's national team from the World Cup."

Iran's place at the tournament was thrown into question after the United States and Israel launched a massive offensive against the Islamic Republic, which responded with waves of missiles and drones targeting Israeli territory and American targets across the Middle East.