

Ballon d'Or 'on my mind': Griezmann

AFP | Madrid

Atletico Madrid star Antoine Griezmann says he still can't fathom why he was not voted one of the world's top three players by FIFA -- but hopes winning the "more prestigious" Ballon d'Or will make amends.

"It's a prize from FIFA and it seems a pity that no World Cup winners were nominated," Griezmann, who helped France to World Cup glory in Russia this summer, told Spanish sports daily AS.

Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo, World Cup finalist Luka Modric of Croatia and Egyptian Mohamed Salah, who enjoyed a stunning campaign with Liverpool last season, were the three players nominated by FIFA for the world ruling body's top prize.

Now grouped within the FIFA Best awards, it will be presented on September 24.

For Griezmann, who helped Atletico to Europa League glory as well as playing a pivotal role in France's World Cup win, FIFA's choice was unwarranted.

"We had a really good World

Cup campaign, the whole team deserve to be awarded: (Kylian) Mbappe, (Raphael) Varane, (N'Golo) Kante, who had an amazing World Cup even though no-one talks about it, or even myself.

"But that's the way it is."

The snub has galvanised Griezmann's ambition to land the Ballon d'Or, the prize awarded by France Football magazine to the world's top player as voted on by journalists around the globe.

"I think the Ballon d'Or has more prestige, a richer history," said Griezmann.

Conceived in 1956, it has been won by Ronaldo and Lionel Messi a record five times apiece. By contrast, the FIFA Best award has been a stand-alone award only since 2016, having spent the 2010-2015 period merged with the Ballon d'Or.

He added: "It's on my mind and I've got three months to give it everything (to win it). We'll see what happens."

Asked if he felt comfortable "sitting at the same football table" as five-time Ballon d'Or winners Messi and Ronaldo,

Griezmann said: "Yes, I think so, although other players would be there as well.

"I'm enjoying being at this table, although I know I can do better.

"I'm at the summit but I know I can improve, I want to be the most complete player possible."

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ANTOINE GRIEZMANN



Firmino better but still doubt for PSG clash

Reuters | London

Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp says striker Roberto Firmino's eye injury is not as serious as feared but said it was too soon to know if he would be clear to play in Tuesday's Champions League clash with Paris St Germain.

The Brazilian had to be substituted in the second half of his side's 2-1 Premier League win at Tottenham Hotspur on Saturday after clashing with the hand of opposition defender Jan Vertonghen.

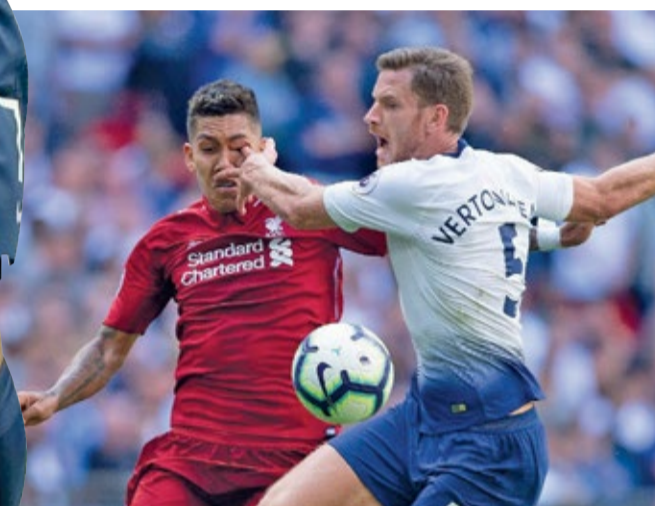
"We all saw the picture

and we were massively worried. But all these worries are away so he will be fine. (But) if he will be fine for tomorrow, I don't know in the moment," Klopp said yesterday.

"We are obviously in close contact with him and it improved already -- but in this moment I can't say if he will be available for (Tuesday)."

Should Firmino be unable to take his place at centre forward, then Daniel Sturridge is the most likely to take his spot.

Klopp said that forwards Dominic Solanke and Divock Origi were both ruled out for the visit of PSG due to injuries picked up on Sunday playing for the club's Under-23 team.



Roberto Firmino was down after a clash with Jan Vertonghen

Costa apologises for spitting incident

AFP | Milan

Juventus forward Douglas Costa has apologised after being sent off for spitting in the face of Sassuolo's Federico Di Francesco in a 2-1 Serie A win in Turin on Sunday.

Cristiano Ronaldo scored his first goals for Juventus but the champions' fourth win in as many games this season was overshadowed by Brazilian Costa's late red card for spitting at Di Francesco -- the 24-year-old son of Roma coach Eusebio Di Francesco.

"I would like to apologise to all the Juventus fans for my wrong reaction during today's game," wrote Costa on Instagram.

"I also apologise to my teammates, who are always by my side, in good and bad times. It was ugly, I am aware of that and I apologise to everyone for that.

"I want to make clear that this isolated conduct has nothing to do with what I've shown throughout my career."



Douglas Costa of Juventus (R) spits to Federico Di Francesco of Sassuolo

Costa now faces an extended ban with coach Massimiliano Allegri annoyed with the forward for "rising to provocation".

"Maybe he was irritated at a foul before, but it doesn't matter, because these things should absolutely not happen. The one thing we must avoid is rising to provocation," said Allegri.

Ronaldo flicked in the first goal from close range in the 50th minute amid a scramble in front

of goal, to euphoria at the Allianz Stadium, and grabbed a second 15 minutes later following a counter-attack involving Costa and Germany midfielder Emre Can.

Senegalese striker Khouma Babacar headed in a late goal for Sassuolo who fell to their first defeat of the season.

Just after Costa was given a yellow card for locking horns with Di Francesco, the two bick-

ering players came together again and Costa elbowed his rival and then spat at Di Francesco's face.

The incident was referred to VAR and Costa was sent off by the referee.

"We could have scored a third goal, but instead we started to play as individuals, we tried to dribble past everyone, this wound up the opposition, who then reacted badly and then you get situations like Douglas Costa," said Allegri.

Allegri congratulated Ronaldo for breaking his duck before their trip to Spain to play Valencia in the Champions League next Wednesday.

"You just had to see the first three games and how close Ronaldo went to scoring," he said.

"I think he rushed a couple of chances today -- it looked like he was absolutely desperate to score.

Kane danger, but Spalletti sure Champions League buzz will spur Inter

AFP | Milan

Inter Milan coach Luciano Spalletti believes Harry Kane will be the man to watch but hopes the enthusiasm of returning to "the Disneyland of football" will spur on his Italian side in Tuesday's Champions League opener against Tottenham.

Against the backdrop of a disastrous start to their domestic campaign, Inter host the English club at a sold-out San Siro in what is their first Champions League match since the 2011-2012 season.

Both teams are coming off weekend league defeats -- Inter losing 1-0 to Parma in Milan and Tottenham falling 2-1 at home to Liverpool.

"Harry Kane tired? I don't agree, we have seen Tottenham matches and we have seen him working in any situation. Tottenham rely a lot on this player," Spalletti told a pre-match press conference.

The Inter coach believes the game could be a "turning

point" for his side, who have just four points from four games in Serie A.

"The Champions League is the amusement park of football, the Disneyland of football. It's a beautiful and fun world.

"These games are worth so much in terms of enthusiasm and conviction.

"I think that with the period we're going through this is the game we needed.

"It's one of those matches and one of those competitions you wouldn't swap for anything," added Spalletti, who spent two separate spells at Roma either side of a five-year spell at Zenit Saint Petersburg.

"I've been lucky enough to experience them several times, there are incredible emotions and if you've been there you can't do without it.

"The previous times I entered a world that's particularly beautiful and entertaining, you can hear the music from inside the dressing room."

Inter Milan snatched Italy's final Champions League berth at the wire last season by finishing fourth in Serie A.

"The effort we put in last year to play in this competition is a motivation that can overcome any lack of experience or fear," continued Spalletti.

"We cannot feel any pressure or be intimidated by the English players' greater experience. Rather, I believe that this match is the chance to kick into gear."

Lucas Perez denies refusing to play at Everton

Reuters | London

West Ham United striker Lucas Perez has defended himself in the wake of media reports that he refused to warm up and come on as a substitute during his side's 3-1 win over Everton in the Premier League on Sunday.

The Spaniard was on the bench and looked like he was about to replace the injured Marko Arnautovic in the second half, but manager Manuel Pellegrini brought on midfielder Michail Antonio instead.

Perez was then captured by TV cameras in conversation



Lucas Perez

with West Ham's goalkeeping coach Xavi Valero on the bench and some sections of the British media reported that he had refused to play.

"Given the false information

spread by the media that has affected my image, I am obliged to explain the only truth: I have never ever refused to warm up in my whole career, let alone play a match," Perez said on Twitter yesterday.

"In the moment that Marko got injured, I was on the bench after warming up. The coach called me to go out to play, however having realized that it was faster to substitute Antonio in, who at that moment was warming up, he changed his decision.

"The images that have been misinterpreted correspond to a talk with the goalkeep-

er's coach, in which I never refused to warm up and explained what happened."



Harry Kane