



FC Barcelona's Spanish midfielder Aitana Bonmati and Messi with their awards

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MESSI

Messi wins 8th Ballon d'Or

Bonmati claims women's award



Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi reacting as he receives the Ballon d'Or football award (from L to R) for the year 2009 in Boulogne-Billancourt, outside Paris, on December 6, 2009; for the year 2010 in Zurich, on January 10, 2011; for the year 2011 in Zurich on January 9, 2012; for the year 2012 in Zurich on January 7, 2013; for the year 2015 in Zurich on January 11, 2016; for the year 2019 in Paris on December 2, 2019; for the year 2021 in Paris on November 29, 2021; for the year 2023 in Paris on October 30, 2023.

AFP | Paris, France

Lionel Messi won the eighth Ballon d'Or of his remarkable career at a glittering ceremony in Paris on Monday, while Spain's World Cup-winning star Aitana Bonmati took the women's prize.

For Messi, the trophy rewards, above all else, his inspirational performances at last year's World Cup in Qatar, when he dragged Argentina to victory, scoring seven goals and being named the tournament's best player. It was the crowning moment of his astonishing career, and it allowed him to see off stiff competition, in particular from Erling Haaland and Kylian Mbappe, to take the award on the stage of the Chatelet Theatre in Paris. It was a return to the French capital after his departure from Paris Saint-Germain in June and his subsequent move to Inter Miami in Major League Soccer.

"This is a gift to the whole Argentina team for what we achieved," said Messi on stage after receiving his award from

David Beckham, the co-owner of Inter Miami.

Messi dedicated the trophy to late Argentina legend Diego Maradona, who would have celebrated his 63rd birthday on Monday.

"Happy birthday Diego. This is for you too," he said.

Messi benefits from a recent change which means the award is based on a player's record over the last season, rather than over the calendar year.

He won despite an underwhelming final season at PSG, even if he was a Ligue 1 title winner.

Mbappe, Haaland just miss out

Mbappe was the star player in that team, scoring 41 goals, and was also the World Cup's top scorer with eight goals, including a hat-trick in the final which France lost to Argentina on penalties.

Yet he fell just short for the Ballon d'Or, finishing third, while Norway striker Haaland came second after scoring 52 goals in 53 games for the Manchester City team that won

the treble of English Premier League, FA Cup and Champions League. Messi is 36 and won his first Ballon d'Or in 2009. With eight, he is now three ahead of his old rival Cristiano Ronaldo, the next most decorated player in the history of the award.

It remains to be seen if Messi will again feature in the running for the prize, which is voted for by one journalist in each of the top 100 nations in the FIFA ranking.

"I am not thinking about the long-term future. I am just enjoying the day to day at the moment," he said.



Messi is 36 and won his first Ballon d'Or in 2009. With eight, he is now three ahead of his old rival Cristiano Ronaldo, the next most decorated player in the history of the award.

Messi will struggle to hold off the next wave of superstars, led by Mbappe, Haaland and Real Madrid's Jude Bellingham, but his World Cup performances made his victory this time feel inevitable.

The women's prize seemed even more clear cut, as Bonmati was rewarded for starring as Spain won the World Cup in Australia in August.

The 25-year-old midfielder was named the best player at the World Cup as the Spanish team overcame off-field turbulence, including protests against their national federation and coach Jorge Vilda, to lift the trophy.

Bonmati also starred as Barcelona won the Champions League last season and was recently named as the UEFA Women's Player of the Year.

"It is difficult to improve on this. It has been a unique year," she told various media including AFP. "If anyone said to me when I was little that I would play at the Camp Nou, win the World Cup, two Champions Leagues, a Ballon d'Or, a UEFA award, these are extraordinary things."

Saudi Arabia only bidder for 2034 World Cup

● The bid comes one year after neighbouring Qatar hosted the first World Cup in the Middle East

● Saudi Arabia announced its intention to bid for the 2034 event on October 4

● At one stage, Indonesia had considered a joint bid with Australia

AFP | Lausanne, Switzerland

Saudi Arabia is in line to host the 2034 World Cup after FIFA announced on Tuesday that the kingdom was the only bidder for the tournament.

The decision will be ratified officially at the end of next year, providing all of the technical criteria are met.

Saudi Arabia, which has invested heavily in football as well as Formula One and golf, is set to take over from an unprecedented tri-continental line-up for the 2030 event, which will be shared between Spain, Portugal and Morocco, with three matches in South America.

The bid comes one year after neighbouring Qatar hosted the first World Cup in the Middle East, where the Saudi national team scored a stunning group stage victory over eventual winners Argentina.

At this point, only "expressions of interest" have been submitted.

After the full bids for 2030

and 2034 are handed over, they will be evaluated by FIFA and put to a vote at two separate congress meetings at the end of 2024.

But the absence of any competition leaves little room for suspense, while also raising numerous questions about the environmental impact of the 2030 event and the compatibility of the 2034 tournament with FIFA's human rights commitments.

Saudi Arabia was initially interested in bidding for the 2030 World Cup alongside Egypt and Greece but that idea was abandoned in June, leaving the path open for the tri-continental bid.

Saudi Arabia announced its intention to bid for the 2034 event on October 4, as soon as the procedure had been launched.

As a result of the continental rotation, FIFA had only "invited" member countries of the Asian and Oceanian confederations to apply -- thus ruling out the traditional footballing heartlands.

At one stage, Indonesia had considered a joint bid with Australia, or even other countries such as New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore, but on October 19 it agreed to support Saudi Arabia's bid.

Australia, which successfully hosted the Women's World Cup this year, was also a contender but withdrew its interest on Monday following the Asian Football Confederation's decision to back the Saudi bid.

"We have explored the opportunity to bid to host the FIFA World Cup and -- having taken all factors into consideration -- we have reached the conclusion not to do so for the 2034 competition," Football Australia said in a statement.



A general view of Saudi capital Riyadh

Sri Lanka mourns 'Uncle Percy' - cricket's one-man cheer squad

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's cricket stars and newspapers yesterday mourned the death of a beloved "super fan" who had become a one-man cheer leader and a permanent presence at international games.

Percy Abeysekera, 87, died at a hospital outside the capital Colombo on Monday following a brief illness, according to his family. Former Sri Lanka skipper Mahela Jayawardene described Abeysekera as the "true 12th man for many generations of Sri Lankan cricketers". "He was there throughout my entire career, cheering us on, waving his flag and always, win or lose, making us laugh," Jayawardena said. "We will all



Percy Abeysekera

miss you dearly 'Uncle Percy'." Another ex-skipper, Kumar Sangakkara, said Abeysekera was as much a part of the Sri Lanka cricket set-up as the players.

"From my debut till my last game Uncle Percy was a constant. His contribution to the game in Sri Lanka stands equal to any of the players that have worn the shirt," said Sangakkara.