

Lionel Messi crowning as the European Footballer of Year reflects La Liga dominance

La Liga swept the board in voting for the Ballon d'Or, reflecting Spanish football's status as home to not only the European champions at club and international level but also the most star-studded league in the world. Viva Espana.

The Premier League boasts more excitement and greater global popularity, but Lionel Messi's crowning as European Footballer of the Year, coming on top of Cristiano Ronaldo's £80 million defection to Real Madrid, should alarm the English authorities. The highest-placed current Premier League player is Manchester United's Wayne Rooney at eighth.

With Arsenal players such as Andrei Arshavin complaining about the UK's pending tax rise to 50 per cent, the likelihood is that more stars will be lured by the siren call of La Liga.

Despite recent changes, Spain's tax system remains far more appealing to sporting superstars and Arshavin has already talked about the attraction of Barcelona.

The Nou Camp has become football's field of dreams. In a poll of journalists (including this correspondent) who award five points to their No 1 choice down to one point for No 5, Messi romped home with 473 points, double Real Madrid's Ronaldo in second place with 233.

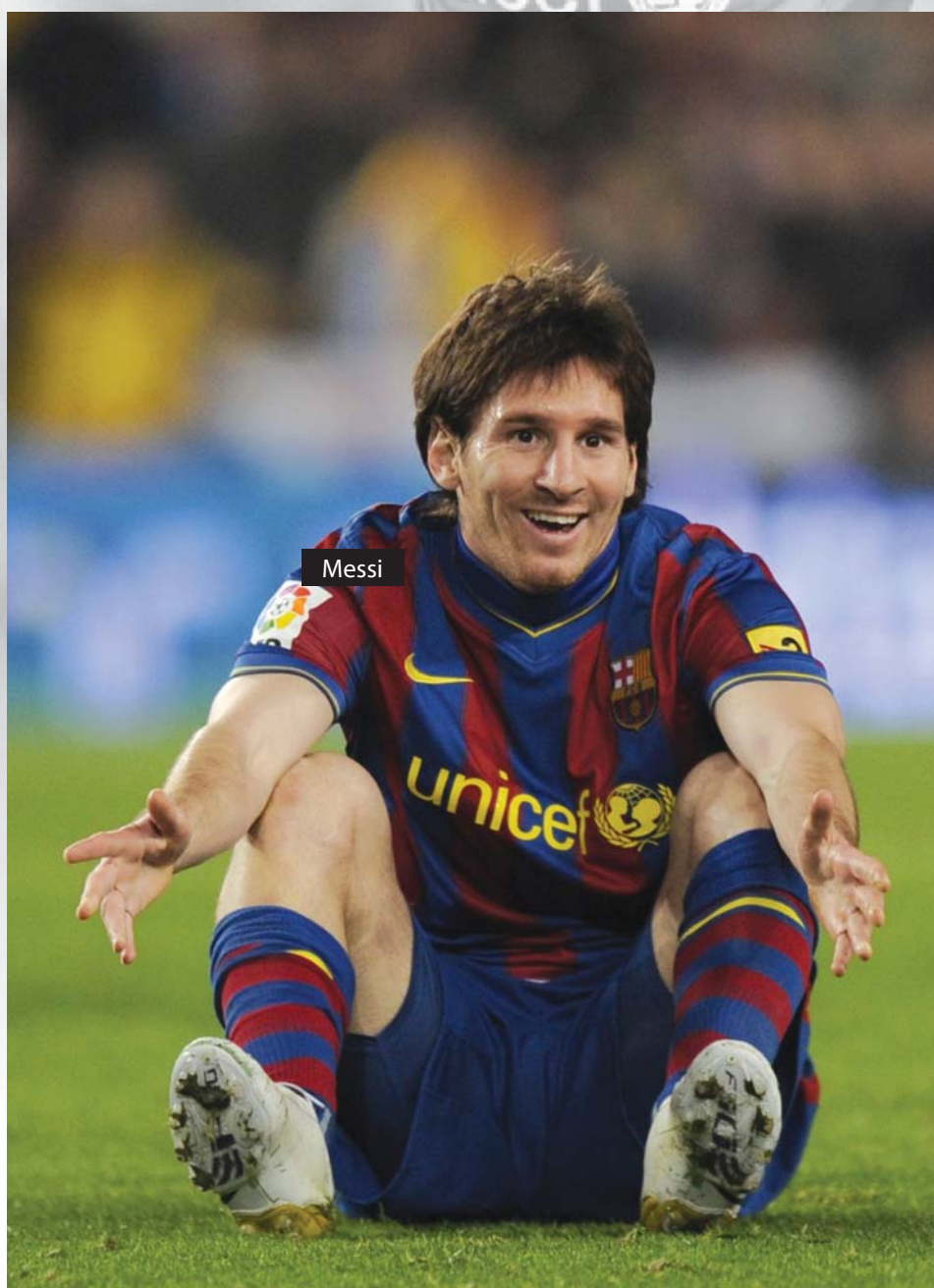
Messi's clubmates, Xavi (170) and Andrés Iniesta (149), came next in the poll conducted by France Football magazine, followed by Samuel Eto'o, who earned his 75 points primarily because of his striking work for Barcelona last season before leaving for Inter Milan.

Kaka, now of Real Madrid but recently arrived from AC Milan, was sixth, followed by Barcelona's Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who traded places with Eto'o this summer.

Only from eight downwards can a current English-based player be found: Rooney followed by Didier Drogba and Steven Gerrard. Fernando Torres was 11th, Cesc Fabregas 12th and Ryan Giggs 14th.

Contracted to Barcelona until 2016, Messi reportedly has a buy-out clause of €250 million (£228 million) but is driven by trophies.

"To have the recognition of being the best player in the world is something special," said Messi. "It makes me happy and proud, but neither was I obsessed with the award. I knew that it could happen and I'm not going to stop



now, I have the same desire to do things well. "It's right that they recognised the efforts of Xavi, Andres and also Samuel. It's well deserved that there are so many players from Barca up there. It would have been more difficult to achieve it without Iniesta and Xavi.

"The prize is for all the group, to the youth system of Barcelona because we have achieved everything with a lot of home-grown players. It's important for the club. I would have voted for any of my team-mates. Anyone in our changing room deserved to win it."

Messi's coach at Barcelona, Josep Guardiola, praised the attacker's "competitive attitude", adding: "Messi is a player at another level. He's so young and he already has league titles, two Champions Leagues, the highest recognition that a player can get... it's very good. The difference is in his head, in his competitive soul. When he's happy, things go his way.

"You need to control his emotional state; if he is stable he will have a long career as a footballer. He has all the attributes, he's tough, skilful, scores goals, is good with his head, understands the game... to be among the best you need to be good at all things and he has that. He must understand that it is a gift for him and for the team."

The coordinator of Barcelona's youth football, Albert Benaiges, told the club's television station: "I've never seen anyone with such humility and good taste for playing football who accepts to play where he's told without ever protesting and with such happiness and love for the club."

This observer found little difficulty in voting for Messi as No 1. The Argentine led the scoring in last season's Champions League, his ninth goal arriving with a header in the 2-0 final defeat of Manchester United in Rome.

After Messi, I voted for Ronaldo, Xavi, Iniesta and Rooney. The United centre-forward deserved a higher finish than his eventual eighth because of his phenomenal work ethic, stamina and deftness in the final third.

MESSI HONOURED TO GET BALLON D'OR AWARD

LIONEL MESSI has admitted he is honoured at becoming the first Argentinian ever to win the Ballon d'Or, awarded to the European Footballer of the Year.

The Barcelona genius was the undisputed star of last season's Champions League, outshining 2008 winner Cristiano Ronaldo in the final and heading the clinching second goal against Manchester United in Rome.

The triumph completed a remarkable Treble for Pep Guardiola's Barca in his first season in charge and Messi was their main

attacking spark all campaign, producing some mind-blowing moments of skill.

Real Madrid's Ronaldo had to settle for second place, as he did in El Clasico at the weekend, with Xavi third, completing a clean sweep for La Liga.

"There's lots of emotion - the Ballon d'Or is very important for me," Messi told organisers France Football.

"I know I was one of the favourites because Barcelona had a profitable year.

"For me it's a big honour to win - but also to become the first Argentinian in history to

receive the trophy.

"I dedicate it to my family, they were always there when I needed them and sometimes felt even stronger emotions than me."

Messi was streets ahead of his rivals in the vote, collecting more than double the nominations of Ronaldo and La Liga dominated the proceedings.

Andres Iniesta, so impressive in the Champions League final, was fourth with Samuel Eto'o, who is now with Inter Milan after scoring in that game, fifth and Kaka sixth.

Barcelona attacker Zlatan Ibrahimovic was

seventh before Wayne Rooney was the first Premier League star back in eighth.

FULL RESULT:

1. Lionel Messi (Barcelona)
2. Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid)
3. Xavi (Barcelona)
4. Andres Iniesta (Barcelona)
5. Samuel Eto'o (Inter)
6. Kaka (Real Madrid)
7. Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Barcelona)
8. Wayne Rooney (Manchester United)
9. Didier Drogba (Chelsea)
10. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool)