

We all know Messi is great – the question is how do you stop him?

By Andy Cole

The latest rich list of footballers' pay by France Football magazine was released yesterday and Lionel Messi has jumped to the top, making £29.6m in 2009 from salary, endorsements and sponsorships to put him above even David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo. I have no idea how realistic these numbers are. But even if they're bang on, then Messi, frankly, is worth every penny.

In the perennial debates about the greatest player of all time, I take the view that I cannot judge Pele or George Best, because I never saw them play in the flesh. I don't doubt their genius but I grew up watching another, Diego Maradona. And now we're seeing a contender to rival Maradona develop in front of our eyes.

I know, I know. I'll have to join the queue to heap praise on Messi, who's still just 22. But even serial winners of major trophies are looking at this kid with awe.

I was fortunate enough to have a decent career. I was an OK striker who scored his share of goals. Essentially I had two assets; movement and pace. Gaining half a yard in the box can be worth a lot, and defenders always hate facing pace.

But I'm sure I'm not the only player with some titles and cup wins who can do nothing but look up – way, way up – at the sheer, utter brilliance of Messi.

I took my boy, Devante, who's on Manchester City's books, to watch Manchester United versus Liverpool at the weekend. He came away saying: "Dad, wasn't it great to see such class as Rooney and Torres? Against each other". He

can spend hours talking football, looking and learning. I feel the same awe about Messi.

I watched his demolition of Zaragoza in Barcelona's 4-2 win in La Liga at the weekend, and if you haven't seen it, look at the highlights on YouTube. Before the game, Messi had scored eight goals in four games, including a hat-trick in his previous league game against Valencia, and two goals against Stuttgart in the Champions League. Then on Sunday he scored another hat-trick at Zaragoza to become the first player in Barca's history to score

consecutive trebles in the league. That took his tally to 11 goals in five games.

His first goal was a header, at the end of a move he started. The second was a wonder. He started by literally wrestling the opposition No 8, Ander, for the ball – that little devil fighter is part of what makes Messi great – then dashed on goal, leaving twisted blood in his wake

before finishing sweetly with his left.

The third came from a ball from Andres Iniesta. Messi caressed it with one touch before curling it inside the post from the edge of the area.

Most players fit some conventional description, but Messi isn't just a striker or a

He confuses.

If you're in an opposition team, it's hard to know who should try to handle him. Do you give that responsibility to the midfielders, and try to stop him getting involved deep? That doesn't seem to work because he's so persistent in that area to start moves. And then when he's started something, he's off to join the flood forward and see if he can get some of the action in finishing it. Have a look at the first goal from Sunday night.

Regular readers will know I'm a fan of Ronaldo, and an even bigger fan of the man who's assumed his mantle with quite astonishing success, Wayne Rooney. But Messi is on a higher plain than even that pair. A second World Player of the Year title is surely his for the taking.

The World Cup will have some bearing on that, but in this form there is no reason Messi can't carry Argentina way beyond where they could expect without him. If we're being brutally honest, England's hopes in South Africa probably rest with Rooney being as fit and in form for every England game as he has been for almost every match of United's season so far. And I don't necessarily think that reliance on one player to take you to another level is unusual, or even bad. It just happens. Logically, then, Messi too can galvanise and transform Argentina.

As for a more imminent assignment for Messi, he will face Arsenal next week in the Champions League in a match of two Total Football sides. What a prospect.



David Beckham toppled by Lionel Messi as Barcelona star leads football earner charts on £570,000 a week!

Lionel Messi earned a staggering £29.7million in the last year, replacing David Beckham as the world's highest-earning footballer.

A study by France Football magazine found that the England midfielder had finally been toppled after two years on the top spot, though he stays above Cristiano Ronaldo in second place.

The £200,000 a week after-tax deal that Ronaldo signed when he left Manchester United for Real Madrid makes him the biggest earner by football salary, but Messi's burgeoning com-

mercial deals and a £3.6m bonus for winning six trophies with Barcelona put him out in front.

The 22-year-old signed a new contract at the Nou Camp before Christmas guaranteeing him take-home pay of at least £180,000 a week, but extras pushed his earnings to more than £570,000 a week last year.

United star Wayne Rooney (right), arguably the best player in the world today, does not reach the top 10, but his former team-mate Carlos Tevez makes No 7 on the list.

The Manchester City forward apparently earned £13.8m last

year - £266,000 a week - while Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard was just behind on £12.8m.

Jose Mourinho is the highest earning coach, with the Inter Milan boss picking up £11.7m, while last year's No 1 Luiz Felipe Scolari fell to third with £8.5m after Chelsea finally stopped topping up his gold-plated contract with Uzbekistan side Bunyodkur.

Roberto Mancini jumped to second on £10.8m after taking the Manchester City job in December.

