

Messi crowned Best FIFA Men's Player of the Year



Argentinian Lionel Messi is seen on the stage with the Best FIFA Men's Player prize at the Best FIFA Football Awards in Paris, France, on Feb. 27, 2023.

● FIFA

World Cup champion Lionel Messi edged Kylian Mbappé again, this time to take The Best FIFA Men's Player award on Monday. The Best Women's Player was Spain's Alexia Putellas for a second straight year, The Associated Press reported. After steering Argentina to World Cup glory in an epic final against Mbappé's France last year in Qatar, Messi won the best player vote against Mbappé and Karim Benzema and secured the FIFA prize for the seventh time in 14 years. He won the World Cup at his re-

cord-equaling fifth attempt. "It was a crazy year for me," Messi said. "I could fulfil my (World Cup) dream after fighting for it for so long. And in the end it happened, and it was the most beautiful thing of my career. It's the dream of every player, but very few can achieve it, so I'm thankful to God for being able to do it." The three players made the final shortlist in voting by a global panel of national team captains and coaches, selected journalists in each of FIFA's 211 member countries, plus fans online. The 35-year-old Messi also beat Mbappé – who was seeking his

first best player award from FIFA – to the Golden Ball trophy awarded by FIFA for the World Cup's best player. Mbappé earned the Golden Boot as top scorer. In the FIFA Awards vote, Messi had 52 points, Mbappé 44, and Benzema 34. Mbappé, 11 years younger than Messi at 24 and considered Messi's heir apparent on the world stage, made the three-man shortlist for the first time. He was fourth in voting for the 2018 award, the year he led France to the World Cup title. Real Madrid star Benzema won the more prestigious Ballon d'Or

in October ahead of the World Cup. The France forward missed the tournament because of injury. Messi was not on the long list of Ballon d'Or candidates announced in August.

Robert Lewandowski won the FIFA award the last two years, and Cristiano Ronaldo was left off the 14-player shortlist for the award this year for the first time. Messi broke a record he shared with Ronaldo by making the men's world best XI for the 16th time. The team included Belgium's Thibaut Courtois, Morocco's Achraf Hakimi, Portugal's João Cancelo, Dutchman Virgil van Dijk, Belgium's Kevin de Bruyne, Croatia's Luka Modric, Brazil's Casemiro, Norway's Erling Haaland and France's Mbappé and Benzema.

Earlier Monday, French prosecutors opened a preliminary investigation into a rape accusation against Hakimi, a defender at Paris Saint-Germain.

Messi voted for former Barcelona teammate Neymar as his choice for best player. Only Brazil captain Thiago Silva also voted on Neymar. Russia's coach and captain were not banned from voting in the award.

Putellas won her award from Alex Morgan of the United States and Beth Mead, who led England to the European Championship title in 2022.

Barcelona playmaker Putellas made the top three again despite being injured days before the Euro and missing the tournament. She scored 34 goals across all competitions last season.

Mead was the joint top scorer at the Euro, and was named the tournament's best player. She sustained a serious knee injury in November while playing

for Arsenal and could miss the Women's World Cup in July in Australia and New Zealand.

Morgan, who was second in the 2019 vote to teammate Megan Rapinoe, was player of the tournament when the U.S. won the CONCACAF W Championship last year. She was also the joint top scorer.

Earlier, Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni was voted FIFA Men's Coach of the Year after leading his team to the World Cup title in December.

The women's coach award went to Sarina Wiegman, who led the England to the title at the Women's European Championship. Scaloni took over Argentina at the end of 2018 on an interim basis, and was widely criticized for lacking experience as he had never coached a professional team. Earlier Monday, his contract as the national team coach was extended to the end of the 2026 World Cup.

The other coaches on the shortlist were Real Madrid's Carlo Ancelotti and Manchester City's Pep Guardiola.

The women's goalkeeper award was given to Euro winner Mary Earps of England, and the best men's goalkeeper was Argentina's World Cup winner Emiliano Martínez.

The event in Paris was marked by tributes to Pelé, who died late last year at age 82 following a battle with colon cancer. Pelé's wife, Marcia Aoki, received a trophy honoring the soccer great from the hands of former Brazil striker Ronaldo.

"I have three words to say to God, who gave us Edson; to Edson, who gave us Pelé; and to the world, who received them so well: Grateful, grateful and grateful," she said.

Lakers blow as injured James facing 'weeks' on sidelines:

Reports



Lakers forward LeBron James lays on the floor injured during an NBA victory over the Mavericks at American Airlines Center, Dallas, TX, US, on Feb. 26, 2023.

● KEVIN JAJRAJ/
USA TODAY SPORTS

LeBron James could face multiple weeks on the sidelines after suffering a foot injury, US media said Monday, dealing a blow to the Los Angeles Lakers hopes of forcing their way into the playoffs.

The Lakers confirmed that the NBA's all-time leading scorer played no part in the game against Memphis on Tuesday due to "right foot soreness," AFP reported.

However, multiple US media reported that the Lakers feared James would be sidelined for multiple weeks after injuring his foot in Sunday's comeback win over the Dallas Mavericks.

James played on after landing awkwardly on his foot in the third quarter but was later seen limping away from the venue following the game.

James later said he was determined not to leave the game in a bid to help the recently revitalised Lakers claim victory.

"I definitely wasn't going to go to the locker room and not finish the game out tonight," he said after the win.

"We'll monitor (the foot) the next couple days, see how it feels and go from there."

ESPN reported Monday that James was undergoing further "testing and conversations" to determine the extent of the injury.

James, 38, has been in blistering form for the Lakers this season, averaging 29.5 points, 8.4 rebounds and 6.9 assists while also breaking the NBA's all-time scoring record in early February. After a shaky start to the season, the Lakers have improved markedly in recent weeks following a flurry of roster moves that has strengthened the team's lineup.

The Lakers remain 12th in the Western Conference with a 29-32 record, but a congested table means they are well within striking distance of securing a playoff spot.

Mansourian named new Foolad manager



● IRNA

Sports Desk

Former Esteghlal and Tractor manager Alireza Mansourian was appointed as the new head coach of the Persian Gulf Pro League club Foolad Khuzestan on a year-and-a-half contract. Mansourian, 51, will be replacing Javad Nekounam, who unexpectedly stepped down from his role after the 1-0 victory over Saudi club Al Faisaly in the AFC Champions League round of 16 last week for what is believed to be a dispute with the new club board. Hamidreza Rajabi, an assistant to Nekounam, took over as a caretaker for the game against defending champion Al Hilal in the quarterfinals last Thurs-

day, which the Saudi giant won 1-0 thanks to a Mousa Marega's 87th-minute strike. The club was willing to continue with Rajabi for the remaining 10 fixtures in the Iranian top flight and the Hazfi Cup fixture against Golgozar Sirjan on March 17 but the coach declined the offer "out of loyalty" to Nekounam.

Expectations were high of Nekounam – who led Foolad to Hazfi Cup and Super Cup trophies during his four-year spell – following the acquisition of some high-profile players during the summer and mid-season transfer windows.

However, a run of only five wins in 20 league outings – including three successive defeats before heading to Doha for the ACL knockouts – has seen Foolad lagging in ninth place of the 16-team table before this week's fixtures.

Mansourian's first game on Foolad bench comes against Malavan FC, which is two points adrift of

Foolad in the table, today in Ahvaz's Foolad Arena.

Foolad is Mansourian's fourth top-flight club after Tractor, Aluminium Arak, and San'at Naft Abadan over the past two-and-a-half years.

Last season, Mansourian led San'at Naft to nine wins in 30 games and a 10th-spot finish in the league. His best stint came with Naft Tehran between 2014 and 2016, when he steered the club to a third-spot finish in the league and the domestic cup final. A successful spell at Naft saw the ex-Iranian international – a fans' favorite during his playing career with Esteghlal – named manager of the Tehran-based Blues for the start of the 2016/17 season, which Esteghlal finished as the runner-up.

Mansourian, who was a part of Carlos Queiroz's staff during his first spell in charge of the Iranian national team, was shown the exit door at Esteghlal following a shaky start to the 2017-18 campaign.

Japan authorities seek criminal charges over Olympics contracts

Japan's Fair Trade Commission said on Tuesday it filed criminal complaints against Dentsu and five other firms as well as seven individuals over alleged bid-rigging on contracts for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

The complaint marks the latest development in months of investigations into alleged corruption in the planning and sponsorship of the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics Games, held in 2021 after a pandemic-driven postponement, Reuters reported.

"We determined that this is a malicious and serious case that will have a broad impact on people's lives," FTC investigator Goh Okumura told a media briefing. The other companies named in the complaint are Hakuholdings Inc, Tokyu Agency Inc, Fuji Creative Corporation, Cerespo Co and Same Two Inc, the FTC said.

All six companies had no immediate comment when contacted by Reuters.

Prosecutors this month arrested a former Tokyo Olympics organising committee official and executives at Dentsu and others over the case, in which the agencies were suspected of colluding in 2018 to rig the bids for the Games' test events.

Dentsu, Cerespo and Fuji Creative have already been barred from bidding for contracts at the industry, foreign and education ministries for nine months.

The bid-rigging case comes after a bribery scandal, in which Haruyuki Takahashi, a former member of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics board and before that a Dentsu executive, was arrested last year on suspicion of receiving bribes from Olympic sponsors.

Executives from advertising firm ADK Holdings, business suits retailer Aoki Holdings and publishing firm Kadokawa have also been arrested in connection with the bribery case.



● ISSEI KATO/REUTERS