**FOOTBALL RISING STARS: WHO IS THE NEXT BALLON D’OR WINNER?**

The debate surrounding the best players in world football has always posed more questions than answers. Portuguese star Christiano Ronaldo and Argentine mercurial forward Lionel Messi have dominated the last decade or so of football’s most coveted individual accolades. With each bagging an incredible five ballon d’ors, no other player comes close to the pair in terms of individual success and trophies amassed. Sadly, the curtains are closing down on them, with the two well beyond their prime years. Ronaldo isn’t the same anymore- he doesn’t score 30 yard screamers like he did against the likes of Malaga in La Liga while Messi isn’t the same speedy forward full of agility and trickery that scored one of the goals of the century only at the age of 19. It doesn’t mean that they can’t replicate such tremendous consistency and form that they showcased during their former years, but the writing is on the wall- tired legs and loss of form that comes with old age is catching up with them and a new king must take over, but who? The mantle is there for the taking, the champagne is there for the popping.

1. **Eden Hazard**

At the age of 28, Hazard is perhaps at the peak of his career. With his passion for the game, vision, supreme dribbling ability and a dangerous eye for goal, only consistency is keeping the Belgium talisman from scooping football’s top honors. So far, he has contributed to over 200 goals,112 goals and 88 assists- testimony to his rich vein of form throughout his illustrious career. Only Neymar, Messi and Ronaldo have had more assists in the same period of time. Now Belgium’s captain and more vocal than ever about his love for a move to Real Madrid, Hazard has one more chance to have a crack at the prize, if only he can guide Chelsea to European glory and step up in telling games. If he doesn’t win it, he’ll still go down in history as a Chelsea legend, a Premier League great and a darling of many.

1. **Kylan Mba’ppe**

No other young player in world football can boast of a better trophy cabinet than that of the Paris St Germain’s superstar. At the age of 20, Mbappe has already bagged the World Cup and three League 1 titles. He has already made his mark in the Champions League by eliminating the likes of Manchester City with the less fancied AS Monaco in the 2016/2017 quarter finals. Football pundits have termed him the new Thiery Henry, others have crowned him a future football great, and some have heaped praise on his electric pace and hawk-eyed finishing while the rest of us can’t help but agree on the aforementioned traits. The fact that he can play on either fronts of the attacking set-up cements his status as a player surely on his way to superstardom. I predict 2 to 4 ballon d’ors for the young Frenchman and only injuries or PSG’s lack of trophies could potentially bar him from having a crack at any football prize on offer. He is not a rising star anymore, he is the only true and viable heir to the GOAT status.

1. **Ousmane Dembele**

Some talk about Lionel Messi’s finesse and close control, others talk about Ronaldo’s proficiency on the ball with both feet, some talk about Kante’s work rate but Barcelona’s Dembele epitomizes the perfect footballer, with all the traits that any center forward would crave to harbor. Talk about his fizzing right foot shots or his precise left foot finishes, talk about his perfect dribbles or his diverse tricks , talk about his insane pace and acceleration on the ball or his timed pressing- Dembele can only get better. Some football fans were too quick to judge him when Barca splashed hard cash on him presumably as Neymar’s replacement from BVB, but the young French international has re-invented his style of play and is now an almost indispensable part of Barcelona’s attacking trident. Will the good, old times return to Camp Nou courtesy of the Frenchman? Only time will tell.

1. **Paul Pogba**

At the age of 25, Paul Pogba doesn’t necessarily fall under the category of future stars, but he is surely in contention to bag at least one ballon d’or in the next 5 years or so. With World Cup glory already up his sleeves, he looks more than ready to reclaim the title of football’s best midfielder under the tutelage of one Ole Gunnar Soljashaer at Man United. In the last 9 games that the former has been in charge, he has recorded an impressive 6 goals and 5 assists, and no midfielder across Europe’s top 5 leagues can boost of better stats. His vision and passing ability with both feet are incomparable, while his strength and playful trickery helps him dominate the middle of the park more often than not. His flair and cheerfulness off the field makes him a worthy commercial figure, and with age well on his side, he may well become the next Zidanne or even better. Pogba has not always been in good writing with the public mainly due to hyped outbursts with the manager not once but severally, but if he keeps his discipline in check and concentrate on football rather than Instagram show-offs, fancy haircuts and needless noise-making, he can finally live up to the tag of football’s golden boy that he once famously enjoyed.

1. **Neymar Jr**

Neymar has just been unlucky, that’s just about it. He may well have won up-to 3 ballon d’ors if Messi and Ronaldo hadn’t been there. He is the most skillful player in the game and his fancy dribbling is equally unmatched. He takes on players for fun and terrorizes defenses at will. Even though he has enjoyed a remarkable career, he hasn’t truly lived up to the billing. His move to Barcelona in the summer of 2013 helped form the greatest ever attacking trio alongside Suarez and Messi but the same tale is a bitter-sweet affair as far as his individual crave for success is concerned. All along, he was always under Messi’s shadow. He is the ‘prince of Paris’ as he is famously known, but age is catching up with him thick and fast. He has also bore bad blood with a section of football fans who hate his playacting and dramatic dives at the slightest touch. He may as well win a Ballon D’or, but he must shun from needless drama on the pitch because it will only make him a subtle target for wrathful defenders and will further make him susceptible to injuries. Neymar is a gong commercially and only Ronaldo comes close, and if he can crown it all with Champions league glory with PSG, ballon d’or is his for the taking. Remember his masterclass against PSG at Nou Camp when he single handedly inspired the greatest ever two-legged knockout comeback? Of course you do! If he can consistently replicate such performances, he is the immediate heir to the crown. No champions league glory for the Parisians, no party for the Brazilian forward!

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