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Maradona snubs Pele at FIFA awards ceremony

By Gideon Long

ROME, Dec 11 (Reuters) - Diego Maradona walked out of a FIFA awards ceremony on Monday before his great rival Pele got up on stage to receive recognition as one of the two greatest players of the 20th century.

In what appeared to be a clear snub to the Brazilian, Maradona left the gala event in Rome early after collecting his own prize as the best player of the century as voted by fans on FIFA's official website.

When Pele took the stage to accept a parallel prize based on votes by FIFA officials, journalists and coaches, he was faced with Maradona's empty front row seat.

"I would have liked to have had Maradona up here on stage with me but it looks like he's already gone," the great Brazilian said.

When pressed, Pele declined to name the Argentine as the best player of the past century while Maradona only named Pele alongside a host of other players.

Pele topped a poll of FIFA's Football Family. He took 72.75 percent of the vote to 9.75 percent for Argentine Alfredo Di Stefano and just six percent for Maradona.

Maradona took the web-based vote with 53.60 percent to only 18.53 percent for Pele.

The volatile Argentine, who flew in from Buenos Aires for the ceremony, dedicated his victory to his compatriots, his wife, Cuban leader Fidel Castro and "all the footballers of the world whom I respect with all my soul".

Asked who he would have chosen as the century's greatest player, Maradona said that as an Argentine he would be tempted to choose Di Stefano, part of the great Real Madrid side of the 1950s and 1960s.

"But I would also have to admit the merits of Platini, Pele, Cruyff, Rivaldo...," he said, before leaving the stage and the hall.

The stand-off between the two giants of world soccer came after weeks of rancour over the terms of the FIFA awards.

World soccer's governing body initially planned to name just one player of the century and Argentines, spurred by media reports, were convinced Maradona had won it.

That outraged Brazilians who argued the terms of the web-based vote were unfair and claimed the Argentine Football Federation had led a concerted campaign to swing the vote Maradona's way.

FIFA, apparently anxious to defuse the controversy, then announced on its website the award would be for a "player of the decade."

It then changed tack again and said the change was simply due to a typing error. "It (the announcement on the website) should have read decades rather than decade," an association spokesman said, implying the terms of the vote never changed.

Pele seemed little inclined to praise Maradona when he arrived at the gala on Monday.

"We're not great friends but I admire him," he said. "If he thinks he's the best player of the century that's his problem."

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