

Atlanta’s Martinez wins MVP award in Major League Soccer

By **PAUL NEWBERRY**
AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA — Josef Martinez claimed the MVP award from Major League Soccer on Wednesday after shattering the record for goals in a season and leading Atlanta United to the championship game.

The 25-year-old Venezuelan striker received his Landon Donovan trophy during a ceremony at the headquarters of United owner Arthur Blank.

Martinez already earned the Golden Boot for scoring 31 goals in 34 games this season, breaking the mark of 27 shared by Roy Lassiter, Chris Wondolowski and Bradley Wright-Phillips.

“I’m very happy because this is an award we all wanted,” Martinez said through a translator. “It is due to a lot of work by myself, my teammates, my coaching staff and my family. I just want to thank all those people.”

He credits his teammates for giving him plenty of scoring chances, including fellow MVP finalist Miguel Almiron. The other finalists were Zlatan Ibrahimovic of the Los Angeles Galaxy, Wayne Rooney of



Curtis Compton/Atlanta Journal-Constitution via AP, File

In this Nov. 25 file photo, Atlanta United forward Josef Martinez celebrates after scoring a goal against the New York Red Bulls during the first half in their Eastern Conference finals.

D.C. United and Carlos Vela of Los Angeles FC.

“If it wasn’t for all those guys, all the passes they assisted me on this season, the spectacular year that all of them had, we wouldn’t be talking about this award or talking about Atlanta United playing in the final,” Martinez said.

He has added three goals in the playoffs. Atlanta won the Eastern Conference title and will host the MLS Cup final on Saturday night against the Portland Timbers.

The MVP is eager to

add one more trophy to his collection.

“We want to be champions,” Martinez said. “We’ve been working two seasons for this opportunity. We don’t want to let it slip away.”

After coming to Atlanta United from Torino in Italy’s Serie A, Martinez made an immediate impact with the MLS expansion team in 2017. He scored 19 goals in 20 league games and might’ve broken the scoring record if not for a quadriceps injury that kept him out for two months. He was hurt

while playing for the Venezuelan national team.

Atlanta coach Tata Martino came into this season with high expectations for the diminutive striker.

“When I rejoined the team in February, there was a meeting between myself and Tata,” Martinez recalled. “Tata told me all I have to do is find space and I could score 30 goals in a season. At the time, I didn’t believe him. Sometimes people say things, but you don’t expect it to come true. Thanks to everyone, I was able to do it.”

Martino will be coaching his final game with Atlanta in the MLS Cup. He is expected to take over as Mexico’s national coach.

“I just wish him the best wherever he goes,” Martinez said. “Maybe we’ll reconnect in the future.”

Martinez said he keeps his Golden Boot trophy on a table at his home, surrounded by game balls.

When asked what he plans to do with the MVP award, he couldn’t resist having some fun.

“I’m going to put it on top of my car,” he joked, “so when I leave my house, everybody can see it every day.”

LA Rams back on top of AP Pro32 poll

By **SIMMI BUTTAR**
AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Los Angeles Rams are back in a familiar place: the top spot in the NFL.

The Rams reclaimed the No. 1 position in the latest AP Pro32 poll. They received all 12 first-place votes and 384 points in balloting Tuesday by media members who regularly cover the NFL.

The Rams (11-1), the NFC West champions, have the league’s best record and are a strong contender to make a run at the Super Bowl.

The New Orleans Saints slipped to No. 2 after losing in Dallas last week.

“Get revenge against Bucs?” asked Fox Sports’ John Czarnecki. The Saints head to Tampa this week to face the Buccaneers, the only other team to beat New Orleans this season.

The Kansas City Chiefs stayed at No. 3 after beating Oakland. The Chiefs, who at 10-2 have the AFC’s best record, will attempt to reach the Super Bowl without the NFL’s reigning rushing champion. The Chiefs released running back Kareem Hunt on Friday after TMZ posted a video of him shoving and kicking a woman in a Cleveland hotel in February.

Also staying in place were the New England Patriots at No. 4. The Patriots are closing in on their nearly annual AFC East title as they head to Miami to face the Dolphins on Sunday.

The league’s hottest team, the Houston Texans, moved up two spots to climb into the top five. The Texans beat Cleveland last week for their ninth win a row.

Another team playing well, the Los Angeles

Chargers, kept their spot at No. 6 after a second-half rally on the road to beat the Pittsburgh Steelers 33-30. The Chargers have won eight of nine and will have an easier matchup on Sunday as they host the reeling Cincinnati Bengals.

“The Chargers proved they are a different team than in years past with a come-from-behind win in Pittsburgh,” said Jenny Vrentas of The Monday Morning Quarterback. “Anthony Lynn is a Coach of the Year candidate.”

The Steelers stayed at No. 8 and will face Oakland on Sunday without running back James Conner, who has a sprained left ankle.

The Chicago Bears slipped two spots to No. 7 after losing in overtime to the New York Giants. The Bears will have a challenge on Sunday night when they host the Rams.

The Seattle Seahawks, who inched up a spot to No. 9, will close Week 14 by hosting Minnesota on Monday night in a game that could go a long way toward determining the NFC wild-card race. The Vikings dropped two spots to fall out of the top 10 at No. 11 after losing at New England.

“Offense is out of whack and the defense isn’t as dominant as in recent seasons,” Alex Marvez of Sirius XM said of the Vikings.

And the Cowboys moved up two spots to round out the top 10. The Cowboys will host the Eagles in a key NFC East game on Sunday.

“A speedy and hard-hitting Dallas defense that hounded (quarterback) Drew Brees into submission readjusts its sights to Carson Wentz in a key NFC East matchup,” said Ira Kaufman of Fox 13 in Tampa, Florida.

Formula One’s 21-race calendar is approved for 2019

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia (AP) — Formula One’s 21-race calendar for 2019 has been approved, with Melbourne as usual hosting the season-opening Australian Grand Prix at Albert Park on March 17.

Governing body FIA said after a meeting of its World Motor Sport Council in St. Petersburg on Wednesday that 11 races would be held in Europe, five in Asia, four in the Americas and one in Australia.

The season will start one week earlier and finish one week later.

FIA said the cars would

be heavier — with a weight limit increase from 740 kilograms to 743 — and that fuel handling procedures during testing are to be the same as during racing.

There will also be more clarity on how grid positions are formed when drivers are hit with multiple engine penalties.

Typically, drivers who have made several unauthorized engine-part changes are hit with a penalty of 20-25 places — which sends them to the back of the grid.

But it can be confusing to understand who’s starting

from where and from how far back if several of the 20 drivers have the same penalty imposed.

Schedule:

March 17:	Australia, Melbourne
March 31:	Bahrain, Sakhir
April 14:	China, Shanghai
April 28:	Azerbaijan, Baku
May 12:	Spain, Barcelona
May 26:	Monaco
June 9:	Canada, Montreal
June 23:	France, Le Castellet

June 30:	Austria, Spielberg
July 14:	Britain, Silverstone
July 28:	Germany, Hockenheim
Aug. 4:	Hungary, Budapest
Sept. 1:	Belgium, Spa
Sept. 8:	Italy, Monza
Sept. 22:	Singapore
Sept. 29:	Russia, Sochi
Oct. 13:	Japan, Suzuka
Oct. 27:	Mexico City
Nov. 3:	United States, Austin
Nov. 17:	Brazil, Sao Paulo
Dec. 1:	Abu Dhabi, Yas Marina

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