

# Expansion idea rejected

REUTERS, Zurich



A majority of the members on FIFA's technical and football committees oppose a proposal to increase the number of teams taking part in the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany, FIFA says.

The committees held a joint meeting at the headquarters of world soccer's governing body for the first time as FIFA's executive committee prepares to decide on Saturday whether the finals should be expanded to include 36 teams.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter has asked Germany to give its opinion about a South American plan to add four teams to the current format in 2006. Thirty-two teams means the tournament can be completed within a calendar month and has a logical progression. Having 36 teams would appease those confederations who feel under-represented but would add hugely to the cost and logistical problems of staging soccer's show-piece event.

Blatter has not stated whether he supports the expansion plan but discussions on Friday led by the chairmen of the two FIFA committees -- Spaniard Angel Maria Villar Llona (football) and Frenchman Michel Platini (technical) --

showed a majority of their members believe the finals should stick with 32 teams.

The group said having 36 teams in nine groups of four is not feasible and noted, instead, that the next viable number of teams would be 40, drawn in eight groups of five.

They also said the current format, with the first and second teams in each group qualifying for the knockout rounds, is "simple and fair" from a sporting perspective.

They cited the financial and logistical problems of increasing the number of teams and said the costs would not bring a corresponding increase in revenue.

The 36-team idea was put forward in March by the South American confederation CONMEBOL after South America, home of 2002 Cup winners Brazil, lost half a qualifying place to Oceania.

The winners of the Oceania group now qualify automatically for the finals rather than facing a playoff with a team from the much stronger South American confederation.

The CONMEBOL idea should face little opposition from European soccer's governing body UEFA, which would gain two more places at the finals. The others would go to CONMEBOL, which has four qualifying slots at present, and the winners of a playoff.

But UEFA president Lennart

Johansson said his executive was not united on the issue and he could not predict the outcome.

"It's a very clever proposal from the South Americans," he said.

"No losers, only winners and, if we had said 'No' right away, we would be criticised from within our own membership for turning down the opportunity to bring two more European teams to the World Cup finals."

Last December, FIFA decided that in addition to CONMEBOL losing its playoff place, holders Brazil would no longer qualify automatically for the 2006 finals.

If the plans go ahead, it is likely there will be nine first round groups of four teams from which the winners and the seven best runners-up would proceed to the second round.

But the FIFA committees pointed out on Friday that "The seven best second-placed teams could not be determined simultaneously, which would result in an extended period of inactivity for some teams and could potentially also lead to arranged results."

An expansion could also mean days on which there were up to six matches taking place, a number that could cause major problems with television and fixture scheduling.

The proposal is opposed by powerful European clubs whose top players are the big draws in the tournament.

At a meeting of the G14 organisation, a grouping of 18 of Europe's biggest clubs, in Brussels on Tuesday, Manchester United chief executive Peter Kenyon said: "We can't just keep adding more fixtures to the calendar all the time."

"We want to find ways of reducing the workload on players and this would seem to be heading in the opposite direction."

Meanwhile, the world body will start a week-long inspection tour of the venues for the 2006 finals on Monday.

A delegation from soccer's ruling body will visit Germany from May 5 to 12 to take a look at the 12 stadiums as well as the media facilities in Munich, where the international media centre is being built.

"The goal is to give the inspectors a view of the facilities on the spot to make sure we keep conforming to the FIFA standards, which are very high," said German organising committee vice-president Horst R. Schmidt.

Berlin, Cologne, Dortmund, Frankfurt, Gelsenkirchen, Hamburg, Hannover, Kaiserslautern, Leipzig, Munich, Nuremberg and Stuttgart have been selected as venues for the 2006 finals.

The opening game will be staged in a new stadium being built in Munich. The final will be in Berlin's Olympic stadium, currently undergoing a major facelift.



MEN UNITED: Ruud van Nistelrooy jumps for joy to celebrate his first strike with David Beckham during their Premiership clash against Charlton Athletic at Old Trafford yesterday. Van Nistelrooy struck thrice and Beckham scored the other as Manchester United won 4-1.

PHOTO: AFP

## Vieira may miss FA Cup final

REUTERS, London

Arsenal captain Patrick Vieira is set to miss the FA Cup final against Southampton and the end of the Premier League season as the champions face a mounting injury crisis.

Asked about the knee injury which has sidelined Vieira since last month, manager Arsene Wenger told reporters on Friday: "There's a good, good chance that his season is finished."

Wenger said that would include the Cup showdown with Southampton on May 17 in Cardiff, though the final decision on Vieira would be made on Saturday.

## It's over for Sukur

INTERNET, London

Hakan Sukur will leave English Premier League side Blackburn Rovers this summer.

Rovers have said that they cannot afford to keep the

Turkish international striker and are hoping the return of Matt Jansen will compensate for his absence.

And Sukur himself has said that he is keen to leave and return to Turkey, with Fenerbahce a possible destination.

The 31-year-old forward also had a dispute with manager Graeme Souness after the 3-1 defeat to Manchester United.

The former Parma and Inter Milan striker joined Rovers in December as a free agent, signing a six-month contract.

However, Sukur broke his leg in training just a fortnight after his arrival and was out for several weeks, preventing him making an immediate impact.

# Another award for Henry



REUTERS, London

Arsenal's French striker Thierry Henry has been voted the English Football Writers' Association (FWA) player of the year.

The award comes less than a week after he was voted English Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) player of the year.

Henry, who joined Arsenal for 10.5 million pounds (16.89 million dollars) in 1999, has enjoyed a prolific season, banging in 36 goals for club and country, including two in France's 5-0 thrashing of Egypt on Wednesday.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger paid a warm tribute to his striker on Friday.

"I feel it's a reward for his improvement, but as well for his consistency and the remarkable number of games he has played," Wenger told reporters.

"For a striker, who is one of the most exposed players, I think it's remarkable what he has done. He's the best scorer and best provider -- so the choice is quite obvious this season."

"I'm very happy for him and very proud. I remember the first six months, when people said 'but he cannot score goals, why don't you buy a striker?'"

"It shows that sometimes when you're patient it pays off. And there's more in the tank."



THIERRY HENRY

The 25-year-old follows Arsenal and France teammate Robert Pires who won the FWA award last season.

He is the fifth player in six years to win both the FWA and PFA player of the year awards, after Teddy Sheringham (2001), Roy Keane (2000), David Ginola (1999) and another Arsenal player Dennis Bergkamp in 1998.

The former Monaco and Juventus player has scored 22 Premier League goals this season, one behind Southampton's James Beattie who tops the premier league scoring chart with three matches remaining.

Three of Henry's strikes have been voted goal of the month -- against West Ham United, Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester City -- making him

the first player to achieve the feat three times in a season.

## UEFA hand out fines

REUTERS, Nyon

Inter Milan have been fined 70,000 Swiss francs (52,080 dollars) by UEFA for crowd trouble at their Champions League game against Newcastle United in March.

European soccer's ruling body said Inter fans had showered missiles on to the pitch and into the Newcastle fans' section and let off fireworks at the San Siro stadium during the 2-2 group stage draw in Milan on March 11.



REUTERS, Manchester

A hat-trick from Ruud van Nistelrooy and a goal from David Beckham gave Manchester United a 4-1 win over Charlton Athletic at Old Trafford on Saturday and moved them closer to the English league title.

United now have 80 points with one match to play. Arsenal, the only other contenders, have 72 from 35 games and would concede the championship if they failed to beat Leeds United at Highbury on Sunday.

However, the race is far from over. If Arsenal win their two

matches in hand, against Leeds and fellow Cup-finalists Southampton next Wednesday, they will move to within two points of United before the last games of the season on May 11.

Arsenal visit relegated Sunderland on that day which should give them another victory, but United have a much tougher final match at Everton.

But whatever the twists that are still to come, it was all smiles for United on Saturday as Van Nistelrooy marked his 100th match for United with a hat-trick, taking his goal tally for the season to 43 just three short of the club's season scoring record of 46 established by Denis Law in 1963-64.

Van Nistelrooy scored after 31,

38 and 53 minutes and has now scored 79 goals for United in his century of games. He has also found the target in the last 11 matches he has played in, including two internationals for the Netherlands and is joint-top scorer in the premier league this season with James Beattie of Southampton with 23 goals.

United took the lead after 11 minutes when Charlton defender Chris Powell failed to clear a high cross, allowing David Beckham to chest the ball down before shooting. The ball took a deflection off Powell which gave goalkeeper Dean Kiely no chance.

But Charlton equalised less than two minutes later when United goalkeeper Roy Carroll, in for the

dropped Fabien Barthez, sent a clearance straight to Claus Jensen, who scored with a first-time shot from 30 metres with the goalkeeper chasing back helplessly.

Van Nistelrooy put United back in front after 31 minutes with a hooked shot when Charlton failed to clear a corner, and made it 3-1 after 37 minutes when he lifted the ball over Kiely.

He completed his third league hat-trick of the season after controlling a long, accurate cross-field pass from Beckham with one deft touch, sweeping the ball home under Kiely's body in the next instant with an unstoppable low drive.

The victory made it 45 points from the last 51 available for United.

## No Celtic swansongs



REUTERS, Glasgow

Celtic's UEFA Cup final appearance against Portugal's FC Porto later this month will not be a swansong for the squad's older members, manager Martin O'Neill says.

The Scottish champions intend to use some of the money from their run to the Seville final -- which media reports estimate is between 10 and 18 million pounds to strengthen their side next season.

Johan Mjallby, Paul Lambert and Neil Lennon are all approaching the latter stages of their careers, while the 31-year-old Swedish striker Henrik Larsson is due to depart when his contract expires at

the end of next season. "We will not be saying bye to players because they're 31 or 32," O'Neill told reporters.

"We want to sign players if at all possible to give them a real fight on their hands."

"I am trying to replace them with younger, and potentially better players, and these boys have proved over the last three years that they are ready for the fight."

Larsson, whose 40 goals have given Celtic a chance of a league and UEFA Cup double, earlier this week repeated his intention to quit Celtic Park.

But O'Neill has not given up hope of holding on to the Glasgow club's biggest name.

"He is 31 and is young enough and capable enough of playing beyond his contract," added O'Neill, whose side are five points behind leaders Rangers with five games to play.

## Zola's target



INTERNET, London

Chelsea striker Gianfranco Zola said his future at the club depends on whether they qualify for next season's Champions League.

The 36-year-old Italian's contract expires this summer but manager Claudio Ranieri is hoping that he will be persuaded to extend it for another year.

"Let's get to the Champions League first - that is a top priority," Zola told the BBC Sport website.

"Once we achieve that, we'll talk about my future. My future depends a lot on what we do this season."

Zola has been instrumental in helping Chelsea challenge for a Champions League spot, scoring 14 goals this season, his best tally in seven years at the club.

With two games left, the Stamford Bridge club are fourth in the Premiership and occupy the final Champions League spot but are separated from fifth-placed Liverpool only on goal difference.

Ranieri, meanwhile has rubbished stories that the London club will let skipper Marcel Desailly leave in the summer.

The 34-year-old defender, who won a record 104th cap for France on Wednesday, has one year left on his contract at Stamford Bridge.

And it was reported that Blues would allow the former AC Milan and Marseille defender to return to his native France.

# Wenger prepared to spend a lot



REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger insists he will have the money to strengthen his squad for next season, despite financial losses at the defending Premier League champions.

Figures out last week for the six months to November 30 showed Arsenal had made a pre-tax loss of 9.47 million pounds and had bank borrowings of 28.3 million pounds.

Though Wenger has never been a lavish spender on the transfer market, the Frenchman made light of what should be a modest budget to strengthen the squad.

"It makes my buying in the summer easier because I will have to strengthen my squad being sensible," he told reporters at the club's training ground.

"I believe I already have a very good team and I will be sharp enough to strengthen the team where it is needed in the summer with the money I have available."

Though he would not go into figures, Wenger indicated his transfer targets had already been identified.

"I know what I want to do and I know who I want to go for," he said. "And I know that the money will be

available for what I want to do." Arsenal are definitely in the market for a goalkeeper to replace 39-year-old David Seaman, having made no secret of talks earlier in the season with Brazil's World Cup winner Marcos.

They are also likely to sign a central defender to partner Sol Campbell as Martin Keown, should he wish to continue, would be 37 when the new season starts.

But when the transfer market opens, Wenger knows he cannot compete with the spending power of title rivals and league leaders Manchester United, the world's richest club.

Arsenal's most expensive player, French striker Sylvain Wiltord, cost about 11 million pounds and Wenger feels it is more of an achievement to win the title with fewer resources.

United have spent 30 million pounds on England defender Rio Ferdinand, 28 million pounds on Argentine midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron and 19 million pounds on Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy in the last two years.

However, Wenger's search for affordable talent has been helped by a transfer market that has taken a tumble and a general downturn in football finances that have left some clubs battling to pay the salaries on long-term contracts.