



PHOTO: AFP

SEE YOU INSIDE THE NET! Arsenal's French superstar Thierry Henry (L) puts the ball beyond Wolverhampton keeper Michael Oakes to score his second goal at Highbury in London yesterday.

## Premiership Roman Empire bombed

### Football

AFP, London

Chelsea's bid to transform Roman Abramovich's millions into silverware suffered its most serious setback yet as Claudio Ranieri's side slumped to a 4-2 defeat at Charlton on Friday.

On the other side of London, a Thierry Henry double helped Arsenal stroll to a 3-0 Boxing Day win over Wolves that left the Premiership newcomers firmly anchored to the bottom of the table and another step closer to relegation.

Arsenal's win lifted them to the

top of the Premiership -- at least until after Manchester United's clash with Everton at Old Trafford later in the day.

A Louis Saha double enabled Fulham to overcome Southampton 2-0 at Loftus Road and move up to fourth place at the expense of their opponents.

Charlton needed just 42 seconds to take the lead against Chelsea. Hermann Hreidasson heading in Paulo di Canio's corner to set the scene for a thrilling encounter at The Valley.

Chelsea got back on level terms in the 10th minute when John Terry nodded in an Adrian Mutu free-kick but Charlton went ahead again with a superbly worked goal ten

minutes before the break.

Paulo di Canio's cute dummy presented Jonathan Johansson with the space he needed to pick out Matt Holland in the box and the Ireland midfielder's header left Carlo Cudicini with no chance.

Charlton then took control of the match with goals from Johansson and Jason Euell in the space of five minutes early in the second half.

Eidur Gudjohnsen celebrated his return from injury with a superb 73rd-minute strike to give Chelsea hope but Charlton snuffed out their fightback and held out comfortably to take the three points.

Arsenal were able to treat their

match against Wolves as a training exercise after establishing a two-goal lead inside the first 20 minutes.

The Gunners went ahead in the 13th minute after the Wolves defence allowed a Henry corner to bounce in the six-yard box. Patrick Vieira was first to react, sliding in to send the ball into the net with the help of a cruel deflection off Jody Craddock. Worse was to follow for the Wolves defender seven minutes later. A moment's hesitation allowed Vieira to rob him of the ball on the edge of the area and the Arsenal skipper was able to tee up Henry to fire home from 12 yards.

The French striker claimed his second of the afternoon and 16th of

the season with two minutes left, slotting home a precise pass from Brazilian midfielder Edu from the left of the box.

A double from Manchester United target Saha earned Fulham the points against Southampton.

Saha, the subject of a 5.5 million pound bid from United earlier this week, added to his burgeoning reputation by latching on to a pass from the outstanding Steed Malbranque to put Fulham ahead after 19 minutes.

The French striker then took his tally for the season to 12 goals with a second half penalty after Luis Boa Morte was brought down.

## Hands off Saha!

### Football

GUARDIAN, London

Fulham on Thursday turned down a £5.5m bid from Manchester United for their striker Louis Saha, though the champions did make a breakthrough when they said Ruud van Nistelrooy had provisionally agreed a new contract, despite firm interest from Real Madrid.

The Premiership leaders are still optimistic about adding the Frenchman, who scored both goals in Friday's 2-0 win over Southampton, to their payroll when the transfer window re-opens in January. For that to happen Saha, having spoken of his desire to go to Old Trafford, will have to agitate for a move.

Fulham's manager Chris Coleman insisted the player would leave "over my dead body" and the London club seem unwilling to entertain the idea unless they receive an offer upwards of £10m.

"The club can confirm it has received unsolicited and unwelcome inquiries from a number of clubs, including Manchester United," said Fulham's chief executive Jim Hone. "However it has been made clear to those clubs that Fulham does not wish, and has no financial requirement, to sell the player, who is under contract until 2006. It is not in our plans to sell a player whose value to Fulham far exceeds any current offer."

Whether that is enough to deter United remains to be seen, particularly as they know Saha wants to join them. Ferguson's admiration for the player extends well beyond this season, first inquiring about his availability during Peter Kenyon's time as chief executive last season. "We are looking [for a new striker] and it's not beyond the realms of possibility," the United manager said last night.

High among Ferguson's considerations is that his potential transfer targets should be available for the Champions League, requiring them not to have played in either that competition or the Uefa Cup.

Saha fits that bill, as does Jermain Defoe of West Ham and Mark Viduka and Alan Smith of Leeds. A striker is Ferguson's priority regardless of Rio Ferdinand's eight-month ban for missing a drugs test and, in a move that will delight the club's corporate backers, he is close to finalising a £1.5m-deal for Dong Fangzhou, an 18-year-old forward with Dalian Shide of China.

About the only certainty is that

any new arrivals at Old Trafford next month will be linking up with Van Nistelrooy, rather than replacing him. To Ferguson's disquiet, Madrid appear to have been wooing the prolific striker through the media recently, much as they did with David Beckham.

United are worried that Madrid's president Florentino Perez is apparently briefing journalists about his desire to make Van Nistelrooy his latest signing. United's directors have subsequently accelerated their negotiations with Van Nistelrooy and his Dutch agent Rodger Linse about a deal that elevates him from the middle reaches of the club's earners to the top bracket alongside Roy Keane and Ryan Giggs. Van Nistelrooy has given his word and the contract should be signed in the next fortnight.

"You can't get upset about it," said Ferguson of Madrid's tactics. "They are renowned for it. It's happened with all their signings - not just with Beckham but with Ronaldo, Figo, Zidane. More importantly, I can assure you I'm trying my best to make sure it won't happen again. We have to put it to one side and concentrate on our relationship with Ruud, which is very good. Ruud is very happy here, I've had a chat with him and we're on the point of signing his new contract. He's still got 2 years left of his present deal anyway, and he's a Manchester United player."

Ferguson's dread that, with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer already sidelined, an injury to Van Nistelrooy would be a critical setback to United's season. Ferguson traditionally likes to have four strikers and, privately, there are lingering reservations about Diego Forlan's ability to trouble Europe's most accomplished defenders.

"I'm not surprised, to be truthful," said Coleman. "Louis is a terrific player and has been banging in the goals. But it doesn't matter which club comes in for him, we don't want him to go. The chairman has told me we don't have to sell any of our players."

"He's invaluable to the club and even if we got £20m for him we wouldn't sell because we would then have to find another striker halfway through the season and it would take him time to settle in. It's too disruptive."

Hone added: "Louis has consistently maintained that he is happy at Fulham FC and understands the importance of playing regular first-team football at this stage in his career."

"Neither the club nor Louis believes it would be beneficial for his future, to become a squad member elsewhere. Media speculation surrounding any player can become unsettling and is not welcome; Louis is very much part of our future and is simply not for sale at this stage."



LOUIS SAHA

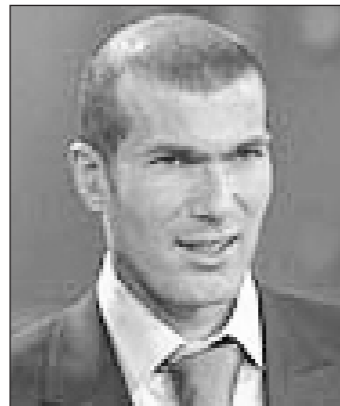
## Zidane to end here

### Football

REUTERS, Madrid

France midfielder Zinedine Zidane has said he will end his playing days at his Spanish club Real Madrid and is also considering when to quit the national side.

"Today I am sure that I will end my career at Real Madrid. It's the best thing I can do. It's unlikely that I'll play for another team and carry on for more years," Zidane said in an interview with the



ZINEDINE ZIDANE

Spanish sports newspaper Marca.

Last month Zidane, 31, told France's Onze magazine he was not certain if he would retire when his Real Madrid contract ended in 2005.

"I'm also thinking about when I'm going to retire from the French team," Zidane added. "We'll see what happens in Euro 2004. I'll take a decision after that competition."

Zidane was named this month as FIFA's World Player of the Year, the third time he has won the award in six years.

## Adu for real?

### Football

TICKER, New Jersey

Is there too much ado over Freddy Adu? Time will tell.

Adu is a 14-year-old soccer prodigy who in November became the youngest professional athlete in the United States in over a century by signing to play for the DC United as assigned by Major League Soccer.

"This is one of the most monumental days in the history of soccer in the U.S.," MLS commissioner Don Garber said.

It was speculated Adu could be the highest paid player in the league with an annual salary of around \$250,000. It remains to be seen if the league gets a return on its investment.

Adu is a naturalized American born in Ghana who has been compared to the likes of Pele and Diego Maradona. But before he can be included in that elite group of

superstars, it might be wise to observe how he will cope against more mature and physical players next season and if he can stay free of injuries.

European powers such as Manchester United, Arsenal and Chelsea of England and Inter Milan of Italy offered more money in an effort to sign the teenage phenom for their youth programs. FIFA, the world's governing body for soccer, does not permit players under 18 to sign a contract with a foreign club.

Initially, Adu expressed his desire to play in Europe, but due to his age, his mother Emilia preferred he stay closer to home until he matures. Adu's family resides in Potomac, Maryland.

"I have faith in the MLS," he said. "They will treat me right. I felt that this was the best place for me to be right now. I never second-guess myself."

Since the MLS took a 6 percent hit in attendance this year after three straight years of increased crowds, Adu could become a main attraction for the league.

## O'Neill prepares for life without Larsson

### Football

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic manager Martin O'Neill says he is resigned to losing Henrik Larsson when the talismanic striker's contract expires at the end of the season.

The former Sweden international joined Celtic in 1997 from Dutch side Feyenoord and has blossomed with the Hoops, winning the UEFA Golden Shoe award in 2001 but this month his agent said he would be looking at moving on if a Premiership club showed interest in him.

O'Neill said Friday: "If he's pretty clear in his mind that he wants to go then that's his own personal choice. If he's going after seven years then he will get the blessing of everyone."

The Celtic boss added: "I don't think it's important for him or us to know where he's going."

"In his own mind I don't think

he'll be absolutely sure. He'll have no end of offers and those people who will be interested in signing him, and there will be many, will be waiting until the last possible moment if that is what Henrik decides on."

O'Neill meanwhile rejected an accusation that his players had refused to shake hands after being knocked out of the Scottish League Cup last week by Hibernian.

The accusation was made by Hibs' Grant Brebner after the match at Easter Road but O'Neill said he would be surprised if his team had behaved in that manner.

"My own view is that I would be very surprised if my players did not shake hands. I would be absolutely amazed and I believe that Grant Brebner actually said that perhaps they were celebrating in all the corners of the pitch so maybe they never got a chance to shake hands."

Celtic and Hibs meet again in the Scottish Premier League on Saturday.