



CAN'T SEE, CAN'T PLAY: A view of the fog-covered Anfield pitch that forced the cancellation of the League Cup tie between Liverpool and Arsenal on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## L'pool-Arsenal tie postponed

### Football

AFP, London

Liverpool's League Cup quarter-final at home to Arsenal on Tuesday has been postponed because of heavy fog, referee Martin Atkinson ruled.

Atkinson assessed the conditions from on the pitch at Anfield an hour before kick-off and said if the fog had not worsened in 30 minutes the game would be on.

However, on his return, conditions had deteriorated and visibility was so poor and unlikely to improve that the match was declared unplayable.

The two managers Rafa Benitez and Arsene Wenger criticised referee Martin Atkinson for his decision to call off the match.

The two clubs now face a fixture logjam with the congested Christmas fixture list looming before the scheduled semifinal date on January 9.

Atkinson postponed the game an hour before kick-off due to concerns over the ability of his officials to perform their duties, but both Benitez and Wenger insisted he was wrong to call off the game.

Benitez said: "Myself and Arsene Wenger tried to convince the referee that we could play, but it was impossible. The referee said that he could not see the different colours and that it

would be difficult for the linesmen.

"But you could see both goals clearly from the centre-circle and the referee said no. I'm surprised because we felt we could play in those circumstances.

"The question now is that, if we draw against Arsenal in the FA Cup third round, when can we play the game? Maybe we need to play both cup ties in the same game!

"If the FA Cup game is a draw, then they will have to move the League Cup semifinal to fit this game in."

Arsenal boss Wenger admitted that he was desperate for the game to go ahead to avoid a growing fixture headache.

He said: "We wanted to play and so did Liverpool, so it is very difficult to understand. But we were not able to influence the decision of the referee. In our opinion, the pitch was playable, but on the safety side, I don't know.

"We have a very heavy schedule against us, though, and it was impossible to rearrange the game within 24 hours. We will just have to see when it can be rearranged."

Referee Atkinson was unrepentant over his decision to postpone the fixture, despite the pleas of Benitez and Wenger.

Atkinson said: "We gave it every opportunity for the weather to clear. But unfortunately it did not and the weather stayed as it was. If you were sat in the stands and could not see the full pitch, you have to think of the fans.

"I have to think of my colleagues as well. If there was a 50-50 offside decision that could affect the outcome of the game, then it would be an impossible job for them."

## Valencia down Mallorca

AFP, Madrid



Mallorca on Tuesday.

Goals by Spanish internationals Vicente Rodriguez, David Villa and Fernando Morientes secured the victory for Valencia, although they remain in sixth place. Villa squandered a great chance

to open the scoring midway through the first half when he had a clear view of the Mallorca goal, after a loose ball came to his feet, but he uncharacteristically sent his shot wide.

However, he earned the forgiveness of his teammates after 38 minutes with an outstanding long-range pass which set up Vicente's left foot effort from just inside the box.

The roles were then reversed for Valencia's second goal after 56 minutes when Vicente provided the service for Villa to get his eighth goal of the season.

Morientes, who replaced Villa on the hour, then rounded off the Valencia victory by heading home

Miguel Angel Angulo's cross eight minutes before the whistle.

The visitors got a late consolation three minutes from time thanks to Jonas Gutierrez penalty, after Raul Albiol had clumsily brought down Victor Casadesus but that couldn't take the shine away from Valencia.

Mallorca have now lost their last three games and will be looking to recover their form during the 10-day holiday break in the Spanish league if they are to avoid being dragged into relegation trouble.

Athletic Bilbao, who Mallorca visit immediately after the New Year, fought out a dull 0-0 draw with

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An airborne Real Zaragoza goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez (L) catches the ball ahead of the flying challenge of Athletic Bilbao midfielder Javi Martinez during their Primera Liga clash at Bilbao on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Jose says sorry

REUTERS, London

Chelsea coach Jose Mourinho apologised on Wednesday for comments he made about Everton striker Andy Johnson at the weekend when he accused the England international of diving.

His apology comes a day after Everton said they would ask the Football Association and Premier League to investigate the remarks he made in a television interview after Chelsea's 3-2 win at Everton on Sunday when he labelled Johnson a diver.

In a statement on Chelsea's Web site, Mourinho said he never used the word cheat and apologised to Johnson, Everton and their manager David Moyes.

"First, I have the utmost respect for Everton Football Club, David Moyes and their players. That's why I love to play them, and especially at Goodison Park where the atmosphere is magnificent.

"Secondly, after the match I was clear and said Andy Johnson is a great player and I never used aggressive words like some managers did against my players in previous seasons, or like some others

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## Colombia make 2014 WC bid

AFP, Zurich

Brazil and Colombia have made preliminary bids to host the World Cup in 2014, FIFA said Tuesday.

The two countries submitted "expression of interest" forms to world football's governing body by the deadline of December 18, FIFA said in a statement.

Only South American countries were invited to bid for the 2014 World Cup.

The expression of interest is the first stage of the bidding to host world football's flagship event.

Brazilian football federation (CFB) submitted its offer on December 13, while the Colombian federation presented its document at the last moment on Monday.

FIFA said it would inform the two federations about the next steps that they have to take.

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## Gago offered to Milan, Barca

AFP, Madrid

Boca Juniors president Mauricio Macri has offered his talented young midfielder Fernando Gago to Barcelona and AC Milan after failing to reach agreement with Real Madrid, the Spanish media reported on Tuesday.

Macri was negotiating with Real officials in Madrid over the weekend for the transfer of his 20-year-old player but apparently his asking price of 23 million euros was too high even for the wealthy Spanish giants.

Gago, one of the stars of Argentina's team that won the Under 20 World Cup last year, has drawn comparisons with the Argentine and Real Madrid icon

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## Money talks...

AFP, London



If it was not Roman Abramovich spending 30 million pounds on a 30-year-old (Andriy Shevchenko), it was Ashley Cole flogging out of Arsenal in a hissy fit over their 'disrespectful' offer of a new contract worth 55,000 pounds a week.

No sooner had the ink dried on a forecast-busting new television deal than Dubai's accountants were poring over Liverpool's books with the aim of wrapping up a 450-million-pound takeover of the five-times European champions.

Money has never talked louder in English football than it did in 2006.

And with the enhanced television cash that will kick in from next season acting like a dose of financial Viagra, never have the country's top clubs appeared so attractive to suitors from around the world.

By this time next year it is conceivable -- likely even -- that half the Premiership's 20 clubs will be in foreign hands.

If the Dubai bid goes through, Liverpool will follow in the footsteps of Chelsea, Manchester United, Fulham, Portsmouth, Aston Villa and West Ham.

Everton, Manchester City and Newcastle look good bets to take a similar route in 2007 as global investors scramble for control of businesses which have seen their outlook transformed by the prospect of sharing broadcasting revenues that

will exceed two billion pounds over the course of the 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10 seasons.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has warned that the influx of foreign capital threatens "the soul of football."

But the buyouts of Aston Villa (by American tycoon Randy Lerner) and West Ham (by an Icelandic consortium) this year have generated few complaints from those clubs' fans, while the hostility of most Manchester United supporters to Malcolm Glazer's 2005 takeover at Old Trafford melted away as results improved.

United's revival -- which began at the tail end of last season -- has served as a reminder that the correlation between money spent and success in football is not always a direct one.

Given how easily they catered to the 2005-06 title in May, it was wildly assumed that the costly summer acquisition of Shevchenko, Cole and Michael Ballack would make Chelsea irresistible for a third successive season.

That could yet prove to be the case. Jose Mourinho's boast that United cannot match the depth of quality in his squad is not an idle one.

Yet it is also true that, apart from giving Abramovich someone he can speak Russian to, Shevchenko has been only a sporadic contributor to the Chelsea cause while Ballack too has yet to reproduce the kind of marauding form on which he constructed his reputation.

United in contrast have prospered largely on the strength of

existing resources, the increasing maturity of Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney being complemented by the Indian summers being enjoyed by the homegrown duo Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs.

Even allowing for the scheduled short-term arrival of Henrik Larsson in January, United do look vulnerable to injuries during the title run-in. But for the first time since Mourinho's arrival at Chelsea in 2004, the year is ending with genuine uncertainty about the destination of the title.

Most neutrals will be pleased about that, but the switch from one-horse to two-horse race will not be enough to assuage concern about the gulf between the top clubs and the rest, for whom a run of three defeats can mean a lurch from challenging for a place in Europe to the relegation battle.

The over-riding imperative of avoiding the financially calamitous consequences of a drop to the Championship was behind the pre-Christmas sackings of Iain Dowie and Alan Pardew at Charlton and West Ham.

Both men could justifiably argue that they should have been given more time, Dowie on the grounds that he had only been in the job for four months, Pardew on the strength of a record that included winning promotion and taking the Hammers to the FA Cup final.

There is also a worry that the financial fear factor is making teams more cautious, resulting in the Premiership currently producing

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## 'United offer too good'

### Football

AFP, Manchester

Henrik Larsson has admitted the prospect of joining Manchester United at a crucial stage of the season was too good a chance to turn down.

The Swede, 35, trained with his new teammates for the first time this week after United manager Sir Alex Ferguson struck a shock, short-term deal with Helsingborgs for the striker to spend the Swedish winter break at Old Trafford.

With Larsson apparently set on winding his career in his home country after turning his back on former club Barcelona last summer, the player's arrival in England has come as a major surprise.

But the player -- who will be available from January 2nd until

his return to Sweden on March 12th -- insisted he couldn't resist the opportunity to join United's double assault on the Premiership and the Champions League.

"It's a great club with a big history and traditions so it feels really good to be here," Larsson said.

"Obviously I had to have a discussion with the family as well because I moved back to Sweden in the summer so I had to have a chat with them and see how they felt about coming over and as soon as that was clear with the family then there was no problem.

"I saw it as a great challenge to come over here to play for a great club and a big club.

"When I was in Scotland with Celtic me and my family were very settled and that was part of the reason we didn't come down here at the time.

"Also we had a good team at

Celtic as well. But now when I heard about this loan deal with Manchester United this was a chance I couldn't say no to.

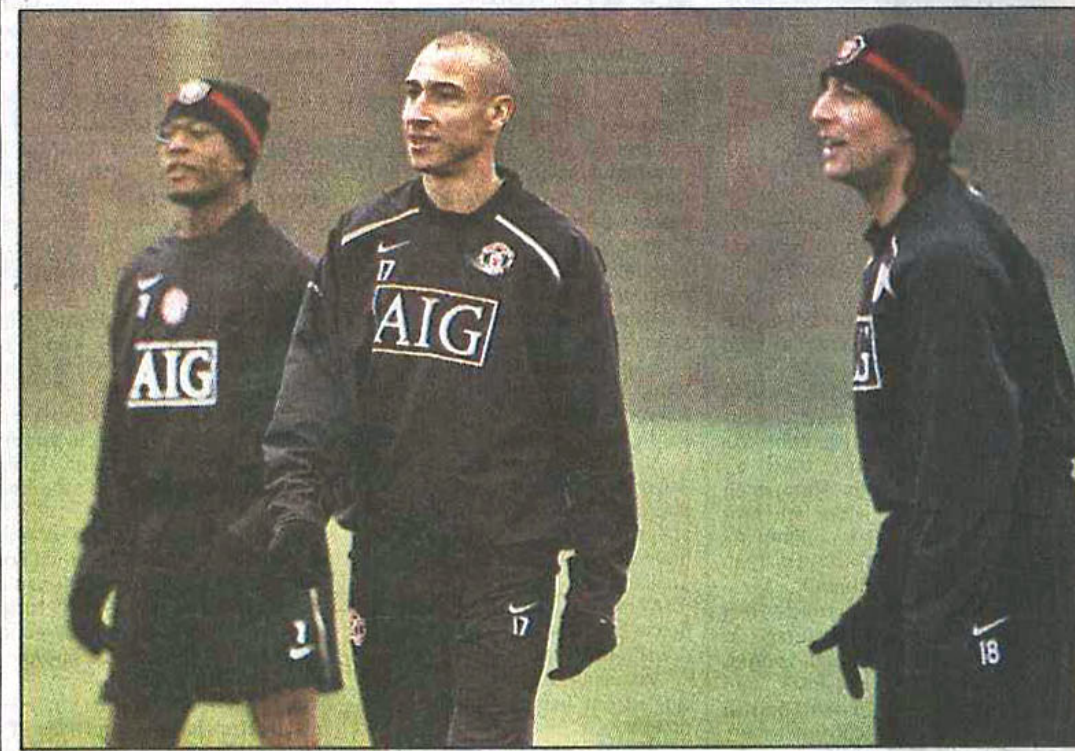
"I'm 35 years old and I don't think I'll get another chance to join such a big club.

"But I'm not just here to enjoy myself. I obviously understand how important all of this is so there's no question it's an important time and I'm fully aware of that."

Larsson, who will wear the number 17 shirt, will make his debut in the FA Cup third round against Aston Villa on January 7 but is confident he will slot in quickly to his new surroundings.

The Swede was in the stands at Upton Park last Sunday when United lost at West Ham United, allowing Premiership title rivals Chelsea to close the gap at the head of the table to just two points, and

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Newly recruited Swedish striker Henrik Larsson (C) trains with his Manchester United teammates Gabriel Heinze (R) and Partice Evra for the first time at the club's Carrington training ground on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Silence is golden for Cannavaro

### Football

INTERNET, undated

Fabio Cannavaro is hoping that his FIFA prize will put an end to the controversy over his Golden Ball success. "I hope this silences everyone," he stated.

The former Juventus man was confirmed as the FIFA World Player of the Year in Zurich on Monday night to become the first defender to net the honour, just weeks after some criticised the decision to also crown him as the European Footballer of the Year.

"I consider this prize even more important than the Golden Ball, because the FIFA World Player award shuts everyone's mouth," said Cannavaro to Radio Cadena Ser.

"There was a lot of talk after the Ballon d'Or win, but this prize is a

guarantee. This year has been a dream for me," added the Real Madrid defender.

Cannavaro, who pipped Zinedine Zidane and Barcelona star Ronaldinho last night, is now hoping to celebrate in front of the fans on Wednesday.

Real entertain Recreativo in Primera Liga and are hoping to have Cannavaro available despite his unjust sending-off at the weekend.

"I hope the Spanish disciplinary committee accepts our appeal so I can play in midweek," he added.

"This way I will be able to present both the 2006 Golden Ball and the FIFA World Player awards to all Madridistas."

The world champion was also complimented by Italy's Prime Minister Romano Prodi today, who stated that he deserved the prize as "a football player and a member of an extraordinary Italy squad."

## Saha extends Man Utd contract

REUTERS, London

France striker Louis Saha has signed a contract extension that will keep him at Manchester United until 2010, the club said on Wednesday. Saha, 28, joined United from Fulham in January 2004 for 12.8 million pounds (25.23 million dollars) and his initial contract ran until the end of the 2008/09 season.

His first two years were hampered by injuries but since the departure of Ruud van Nistelrooy to Real Madrid he has become a regular strike partner for Wayne Rooney and is United's leading scorer this season with 12 goals in all competitions.

"I'm delighted that we have extended Louis's contract," United manager Alex Ferguson told the Premier League leaders' official Website.

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