

Probe into Assis doping

AFP, Lisbon

The Portuguese Football Federation (FPF) have been ordered to reopen the doping case against Benfica midfielder Nuno Assis which their disciplinary commission decided not to pursue earlier this year.

The decision comes after Portuguese Secretary of State for Youth Laurentino Dias on Thursday backed the Attorney General's opinion that the FPF had violated the law.

The 29-year-old Assis was provisionally suspended after testing positive for the steroid 19-Norandrosterone last December following a Portuguese first division game. The B-sample confirmed the positive test.

But the FPF decided last July not to take action against the player, who has denied taking banned substances.

Dias said that the FPF's decision "flagrantly violates national and international rules in relation to the fight against doping".

Assis, who appeared before the Court of Arbitration of Sport (CAS) in Lausanne, Switzerland on Wednesday, risks a two year suspension.

"I'm confident that the decision of the Portuguese Football Federation's council of justice will be upheld," the player insisted.

Lavolpe backs Gago

INTERNET, undated

Former Boca Juniors coach Ricardo Lavolpe believes that midfielder Fernando Gago can create a legacy to match that of Fernando Redondo with his new club Real Madrid.

Lavolpe, who coached Gago at Boca during the second half of the 2006 season, is sure that Real's latest signing "will mark a new era, just as Redondo did".

Redondo is one of the biggest names in Real's history. He played for the club between 1994 and 2000, winning two Champions League titles, two domestic titles, one Spanish Supercopa and one Intercontinental Cup.

Speaking to the AS newspaper, Lavolpe - the newly appointed Velez Sarsfield manager - backed Gago to shine despite his tender age of 20.

"He is young, but he comes from Boca and knows the weight of the responsibility of always winning."

"He is more than just a promise. Gago is a young expert. He has the potential to be a new Redondo. He has his quality and his elegance."

"You see him play and he has elegance in both attacking and defending. He will contribute a lot to Real Madrid in midfield."

"He is starting a new phase. He has youth, quality and temper in his favour. I am very lucky for having coached him," added Lavolpe.

Adebayor to miss Blades match

AFP, London

Arsenal will be without striker Emmanuel Adebayor for the Premiership match away to Sheffield United on Saturday.

The Togo international sustained a thigh strain during the closing moments of Tuesday's 2-1 league win away to bottom-of-the-table Watford.

His injury reduces the Gunners' attacking option still further with captain Thierry Henry continuing to be sidelined because of a sciatic nerve problem.

However, the hamstring injury that defender Johan Djourou suffered at Vicarage Road was not considered too serious.

"Djourou is injured a little bit, but what is worse that we lost Adebayor with a thigh strain," said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger.

"It is exactly the same but on the other leg. He will be out for Saturday."

Arsenal's win against Watford moved the north Londoners up into third place in the table but Wenger's men are still 14 points behind Premiership leaders Manchester United.

Granqvist seals Wigan move

AFP, London

English Premiership side Wigan are set to sign Sweden defender Andreas Granqvist from Helsingborgs on a loan deal to the end of the season.

Granqvist is due at the club on Thursday to put the final touches on a move that could be made permanent in the summer.

The 21-year-old is the second Helsingborgs player to recently leave the club for the English top flight following Henrik Larsson's loan move to Manchester United.



Fulham left-back Frank Queudrue (bottom) is mobbed by teammates as he celebrates his equaliser against Charlton Athletic during their Premiership clash at the Valley on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pardew left 'disgusted'

AFP, London



Alan Pardew was robbed of a winning start as Charlton manager when Fulham snatched a controversial injury-time goal in a 2-2 draw in the English Premiership on Wednesday.

Fulham were awarded a free-kick three minutes into time added on at The Valley after Djimi Traore was wrongly penalised for a hand-ball.

Michael Brown quickly took the kick which landed kindly for Frank Queudrue to score and secure a point for the Cottagers.

"I am absolutely disgusted. Mistakes happen but you would expect the officials to be nice and calm and they made a bad mistake," said Pardew, Charlton's third manager this season.

"It's a really tough call. We were two minutes away from ecstasy but

we feel deflated."

Despite the draw, Pardew, sacked by West Ham last month, is already planning for the future with former Hearts defender Steven Pressley, who watched Wednesday's match from the stands, likely to sign in the transfer window.

"There is a good chance he will be at Charlton and he will be a good addition if we can secure him for nothing," said Pardew.

Fulham had gone ahead in the 12th minute through Brian McBride, but Darren Ambrose fired Charlton level six minutes later before Darren Bent took advantage of a mix-up in the Fulham defence to slot home on the stroke of half-time.

But their hopes of a fourth win of the season were cruelly dashed by Queudrue's late leveller.

The result left Charlton, who sacked Les Reed as manager on Christmas Eve, second from bottom of the table and seven points from safety.

Fulham stay 12th but are now level on points with Newcastle.

The first goal arrived when Ambrose gave away a free-kick with a foul on Brown and when Wayne Routledge sent over the ball.

Carlos Bocanegra headed the ball off the bar only for American international McBride to slot home the rebound for his sixth goal of the season.

However, Ambrose soon equalised.

Fulham goalkeeper Antti Niemi made a poor punch from a Jerome Thomas shot and Ambrose drove the ball home past a group of players.

Charlton then took the lead on the stroke of half-time after a mix-up between Fulham defenders Carlos Bocanegra and Moritz Volz who allowed goalkeeper Scott Carson's long punt slip by them.

As they stood and watched, Darren Bent nipped in to score his seventh league goal of the season and the 100th of his career.

Fergie launches Chelsea jibe

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has said his side's superior goal difference is the equivalent of a point advantage in the battle for the Premiership title with Chelsea as he tried to aim another dig at Blues counterpart Jose Mourinho.

United are four points clear after a 3-1 Boxing Day win against Wigan on Tuesday followed by second-placed reigning champions Chelsea who dropped points in a surprise 2-2 draw at home to Reading.

But such has been United's attacking form this season that, even were Chelsea to draw level on points, they would in all likelihood still be behind the leaders.

Ferguson's men have a huge goal difference advantage of 13 over Chelsea who have scored 35 league goals so far this season compared to United's 44.

Not since 1989 has the English title race been decided on goal difference when Arsenal's dramatic win away to Liverpool on the final day of the season saw them climb above the Merseysiders.

But, in what he expects to be a

tight race, Ferguson believes goal difference could play a key role in deciding the destiny of this season's title. "The goal difference helps us, there is no doubt about that," said the Scot. "I have always believed in those terms, 10 or 12 goals makes a point."

"If it remains that way, it is something we have to fall back on. Hopefully we won't have to, but it is there anyway," Ferguson added.

United will have to make at least two changes for Saturday's match against Reading at Old Trafford with Nemanja Vidic and Paul Scholes both suspended after reaching five yellow cards for the campaign.

Their absences could see Rio Ferdinand and Ryan Giggs return to the starting line-up while Gary Neville and Louis Saha could replace defender Wes Brown and striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer respectively.

"We are coming to the part of the season where we have to utilise the squad and I need to let some of the players who haven't been in the team regularly know that I have confidence in them and that I trust them," Ferguson explained.

"I want them to feel they made a contribution. I also need them to have minutes on the clock in case we do pick up injuries and suspen-

sions."

Reading, promoted from the Championship last term, have risen to ninth in the table under the guidance of former United and England winger Steve Coppell.

In September, the Royals held the Red Devils to a highly creditable 1-1 draw at the Madejski Stadium and Ferguson said: "We have to be wary of Reading."

"I wasn't really surprised by the way they performed at Chelsea, although I was pleasantly delighted by the result. It just reinforced what we will have to do this weekend."

Broken leg for Balde

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic defender Bobo Balde suffered a broken leg during Tuesday's 2-2 draw with Dundee United, the Glasgow giants announced Wednesday.

The Guinea international will now be out for several months as a result of the injury.

"Celtic Football Club can confirm that Bobo Balde suffered a leg break during the 2-2 draw with Dundee United on Boxing Day," said a club statement.

Injury blow for Amauri

AFP, Rome

Palermo's in-form Brazilian striker Amauri is facing a lengthy spell on the sidelines after damaging cruciate ligaments in his right knee, the Sicilian Serie A club said Wednesday.

The 26-year-old, who has scored eight league goals this season, suffered the injury after colliding with Siena goalkeeper Alex Manninger in last Saturday's 1-1 draw.

Amauri, who joined Palermo from Verona club Chievo for the start of the campaign and has been one of the outstanding strikers in Italy's top division this season, is expected to be ruled out for several months.

The loss of Amauri is a massive blow to Palermo who are currently lying in third place in Serie A on 35 points, 13 behind leaders Inter Milan but nine clear of fourth-placed Catania.

The top two go directly into the Champions League while the teams finishing third and fourth will need to overcome a two-legged third qualifying round to join the group stage.

Micah not for sale: Pearce

AFP, London

Manchester City manager Stuart Pearce has said he has been in touch with Chelsea over possible signings sparking talk of a move for former player Shaun Wright-Phillips.

Pearce also denied that Chelsea had been in touch about a possible bid in the January transfer window for young England defender Micah Richards to replace injured skipper John Terry.

"There has been no contact from Chelsea, although I have rung them about players coming here," Pearce said.

"I am delighted we have interest in our players because it means those players are doing well."

"But I must remind everyone that Manchester City are not in the situation they were two years ago, when we had to sell."

"Players will only leave this club if it benefits the club."

Pearce also denied suggestions former skipper Sylvain Distin has rejected a final contract offer, insisting he still believes the Frenchman will stay with City.

"We have been talking to Sylvain for 18 months now and I honestly believe he will end up signing a new contract, whether that is next week, next month or in the summer, I do not know."

Betis appoint Fernandez

AFP, Madrid

Frenchman Luis Fernandez has been appointed coach of relegation threatened Spanish club Real Betis in place of sacked Javier Irujeta.

"I'm made for this type of challenge," Fernandez told RMC radio Wednesday.

"I'm happy to have this opportunity. There is quality in this group which includes quite a few Brazilians. We have to give them the confidence to win."

Betis, who played in the Champions League last season, currently sit third from bottom of the 20-team Spanish first division.

Fernandez is no stranger to the basement dogfight having saved Espanyol from the dreaded drop in 2003-04. The 47-year-old has also coached Atletico Bilbao in the top flight from 1996 to 2000.

Milan leading Cassano hunt

INTERNET, undated

Milan are leading the race to sign Real Madrid forward Antonio Cassano, despite interest from a number of Premiership clubs.

The Rossoneri are determined to bring Cassano back to Italy but Real will only sanction a loan transfer in January.

Real are exploring a number of avenues for the former Roma star and have been in touch with Premiership sides about his availability.

Cassano's agent Giuseppe Bozzo has already attempted to dampen the speculation but rumours are rife that his client will be allowed to move on.

"Where do you want Antonio to go?" asked Bozzo. "He is staying put at Real."

"He has no intention of going anywhere."

Al-Ahly flies African flag

Football

AFP, Cairo

The stars of Cairo football club Al-Ahly conquered Africa twice this year to emerge as continental kings.

Last February, an Ahly-dominated Egypt team won the African Nations Cup a record fifth time with a penalty shootout victory over Ivory Coast before a capacity 80,000 crowd here.

In November, Ahly retained the African Champions League in dramatic fashion with midfield maestro Mohamed Aboutaika scoring the winner two minutes into stoppage time against CS Sfaxien of Tunisia.

And this month Ahly exceeded expectations by finishing third in the FIFA Club World Cup with victories over Auckland City of New Zealand and Club America of Mexico in Japan.

Ahly claim to have 40 million supporters across the Middle East and the crowd that welcomed the 'Red Devils' home from Tokyo was even larger than that which celebrated the Nations Cup triumph.

But amid the glory came tragedy as 22-year-old fullback Mohamed Abdelwahab collapsed 35 minutes into an August training session and died of heart complications en

route to a Cairo hospital.

"Mohamed was with us all the time and we sometimes felt he was there on the pitch," confessed captain Shady Mohamed after Ahly lifted the Champions League a record-equaling fifth time.

If memories of Abdelwahab, a member of the Nations Cup-winning team, evoke sadness, the image of the smiling Aboutaika was a source of pride in the sandy backstreets of the Egyptian capital where Ahly are revered.

Often slipping undetected into his own half to gain possession, Aboutaika quashed the myth that although north African footballers possess discipline and technique, they lack the flair of those from sub-Saharan nations.

At the Nations Cup, Egypt beat Libya, drew with Morocco and beat weakened Ivory Coast to top their Nations Cup group, outclassed the Democratic Republic of Congo, and edged Senegal in a tense semi-final.

The goalless 120-minute decider was no classic as evenly-matched teams cancelled each other out and veteran goalkeeper Essam al-Hadary proved the hero, saving two penalties, including one from Chelsea striker Didier Drogba.

Ahly beat surprise packets CS Sfaxien 1-0 to win the Champions League after a drawn first leg in Cairo triggered premature Tunisian

celebrations that infuriated coach Manuel Jose.

There was some consolation for Tunisia in the African Confederation Cup as Etoile Sahel pipped Moroccan military club FAR Rabat on away goals after a 1-1 aggregate stalemate in a fiery final.

The World Cup in Germany proved a massive flop for Africa with only Ghana getting beyond the pool phase, and they were swept aside by defending champions Brazil in the first knockout round as easily as the 3-0 scoreline suggests.

After losing to eventual champions Italy, the Black Stars of Ghana shocked the Czech Republic and overcame the United States, but could ill afford the absence of suspended Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien against the Brazilians.

Exciting Ivory Coast were best of the rest followed by dour Angola. More was expected of Tunisia, who amassed only one point, while Togo brought only shame to Africa with threats to boycott matches over bonus disputes.

Togo were fined 80,000 dollars, but the World Cup organisers harboured no grudge against the continent, granting it an additional sixth place when South Africa in 2010 becomes the first African hosts of the showpiece.

Defoe credits fans

Football

INTERNET, undated

Jermain Defoe believes Tottenham's fans have played an important role in the club's impressive run of victories at White Hart Lane.

Defeating Aston Villa on Boxing Day took Spurs' streak of consecutive home wins to 12, with Defoe scoring twice to take his tally to 50 for the club.

Even the 24-year-old's England team-mates have noticed the atmosphere created at the ground, and Spurs' home form has kept them involved in four fronts heading into 2007.

"It's credit to the fans, they get behind us and everyone is buzzing at the minute," said Defoe. "We just want to keep it going."

"I love playing here. When I go away with England and speak to the other lads, for some reason a lot of the lads like playing here."

Spurs are in the last four of the

Eto'o targets January return

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona striker Samuel Eto'o, who has been sidelined with a right knee injury since September, will return to training in mid-January, the Spanish champions said on Wednesday.

In a double boost for the Champions League winners, it is also expected that Argentinian attacker Lionel Messi could resume training at the start of February after being out since the middle of November with a foot injury.

The club also announced on its website that veteran French defender Lilian Thuram, who tore a muscle in his left leg last week, should be fit again at the beginning of February.



Barcelona striker Samuel Eto'o (L) sits with a player of the Cameroon Football 7 Selection at the 11th 7-International Championships in Tenerife on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

- 1 Follow relentlessly
- 6 Map lines
- 11 Set site
- 12 Overseas
- 14 Hungarian cavalryman
- 15 Stamina
- 16 Fictional creature
- 17 Pass on
- 19 U.S. spy grp.
- 20 Cheese choice
- 22 Lend a hand
- 23 Former national capital
- 24 Church council
- 26 Party outfit?
- 28 Cal. page
- 30 Spanish pronoun
- 31 Tropical fruits
- 35 Unnecessarily decorates
- 39 Calm before the storm

DOWN

- 1 Unlikely to collapse
- 2 "Under the Sun"
- 3 Billboards
- 4 Teller of false tales
- 5 "M*A*S*H" locale
- 6 Fast time on a —"
- 7 Act the robot
- 8 Illustrations
- 9 Online business
- 10 Kansas city
- 11 Footwear (Pl.)
- 13 Campus VIPs
- 14 Prelude
- 15 "Nevermore" speaker
- 16 54 Prelude
- 17 "Nevermore" speaker
- 18 54 Prelude
- 19 U.S. spy grp.
- 20 Cheese choice
- 22 Lend a hand
- 23 Former national capital
- 24 Church council
- 26 Party outfit?
- 28 Cal. page
- 30 Spanish pronoun
- 31 Tropical fruits
- 35 Unnecessarily decorates
- 39 Calm before the storm

18 Back talk

21 Structural

23 Founda-

25 Susan of "L.A. Law"

27 Trot

29 Language of Barcelona

31 "Snakes on a —"

32 Artsy director

33 Lung membrane

34 — generis

36 Less corpulent

37 Oscar winner as 44-Down

38 Pungent

41 Filled pancakes

44 Boxer LaMotta

45 Read bar codes

48 Gun the engine

50 Decide (for)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11									13
14					15				
16			17		18			19	
20		21		22			23		
24			25		26		27		
			28		29		30		
31	32	33		34		35	36	37	38
39			40		41		42		
43			44		45		46		
47		48			49		50		
51					52				
					53				54

CRYPTOQUIP

LBVK LUMZY WVSP V HWVZZ
 YVEEZAGX YMFS VFK RPQT
 DPVQZPHHZZ? AK WAXBK
 EP AKH GPQRPH UD KPVZ.
Yesterday's Cryptquip: IF SOMEBODY HAS NO FORMAL DRESS PANTS, I SUPPOSE YOU'D SAY THAT HE LACKS BLACK SLACKS.

Today's Cryptquip Clue: K equals T

The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals C, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.



French legend Michel Platini (3rd from L) watches as Israeli Prime Minister Simon Peres (3rd from R) shoots the ball to inaugurate a friendly football match for Peace at the Cartuja stadium in Sevilla on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP