



Indian batsman VVS Laxman plays a defensive stroke against South African paceman Makhaya Ntini on the third day of the second Test at the Kingsmead Stadium in Durban on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

Power cut stops Proteas

Cricket

AFP, Durban

A power failure and bad light halted South Africa's surge into a strong position on the third day of the second Test at Kingsmead Thursday.

South Africa were 64 for no wicket, an overall lead of 152, when bad light ended play for the day.

Only eight balls were bowled and four runs added after a 45-minute stoppage caused when four of the five floodlights augmenting poor natural light went out of operation.

Play resumed after the power was restored but umpires Asad Rauf and Ian Howell soon decided the light was too bad. They took the players off the field to the obvious dismay of South African captain Graeme Smith and fellow opening batsman AB de Villiers.

Smith and De Villiers were earlier booed when they opted for the dressing room following the power failure. The batsmen initially opted to continue batting but soon afterwards a vicious bouncer from VVS Singh hit AB de Villiers on the glove, flying over the slips. At the end of the over Smith gestured at

the failed floodlights and the umpires offered him the chance to go off.

South Africa need to win to square the three-match series and with more cloudy weather predicted for the remaining two days, the loss of 36.3 overs Thursday was a blow to their chances of forcing a victory.

India were earlier all out for 240 on a heavily overcast day. The floodlights were on from soon after the start of play.

South Africa bowled efficiently to gain a first innings lead of 88 despite a patient unbeaten half-century by VVS Laxman, who finished with 50 not out after batting for 282 minutes. He faced 156 balls and hit three fours.

Indian wickets fell in bursts, with the most crucial breakthrough achieved by Makhaya Ntini, who dismissed Sachin Tendulkar and Sourav Ganguly within three balls to reduce India to 125 for five. Tendulkar made 63, his first Test half-century of the year, before attempting a cramped cut to be caught behind.

It was the first time in 14 innings since he made 109 against Sri Lanka in Delhi in December 2005 that Tendulkar had made a substantial score. He batted for 174 minutes, faced 115 balls and hit 11

boundaries. Laxman and Mahendra Singh Dhoni put on 54 for the sixth wicket before new cap Morkel took three wickets for two runs in 20 balls as India limped to 183 for eight at lunch.

There was more resistance from the tourists when Laxman and Shanthakumaran Sreesanth added 52 for the ninth wicket before the last two wickets fell within six balls.

Ntini took three for 41 and Morkel finished with three for 86.

De Villiers and the out-of-form Smith shared the best opening partnership of a series in which the openers of both teams have struggled as South Africa took the lead beyond 100. It was the first time in four innings that South Africa reached double figures without losing a wicket.

Smith had another shaky start. Before he had scored he edged Zaheer Khan just short of first slip. But he gradually improved his timing as he reached 28 not out by the close. De Villiers was on 31.

Umpire Mark Benson had to leave the field with heart palpitations four overs into the day. He was taken to St Augustine's hospital and admitted to the intensive care

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Totti forever a Romanista

AFP, Rome

Francesco Totti wants to extend his contract with Roma so that he can finish his career with the Serie A club to whom he has always stayed loyal.

The 30-year-old striker, who helped Italy win the World Cup this year, has a contract that expires in five years' time but wants to prolong his stay with his hometown club.

"My contract runs out in 2011 but soon I would like to extend it for another two or three years," the Roma captain told Italian magazine Numero 10.

"As long as I am fit I will play on as long as possible. Then when I stop playing we will see what happens."

"I want to stay in football as a

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Drogba at the back

INTERNET, undated

Jose Mourinho says that he would play Didier Drogba at centre-half if he had more attacking options available to him.

With John Terry out injured, and William Gallas and Robert Huth having been sold in the summer, Chelsea have been desperately short in defence recently, and have uncharacteristically conceded six goals in their last three games.

Mourinho says Drogba could offer a stop-gap solution, but that he is not an option because he needs the Ivorian to continue

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Milan set to sign Grimi

INTERNET, undated

Young Argentine full-back Leandro Grimi is set to become Milan's first signing in the January transfer window.

Young Argentine full-back Leandro Grimi is set to become AC Milan's first signing in the January transfer window.

The 21-year-old is in Milan to tie up the loose ends of a five-year-deal and will sign for Racing in Argentina in a deal worth around 2 million euros (£1.35 million).

Grimi is being signed as much as a prospect for the future as for the present, but he should still be integrated into the Milan first team squad during the club's winter training camp in Malta which is due to be held between the 2nd and

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Figo 'agrees' Ittihad switch

INTERNET, undated

Luis Figo is set to join Al Ittihad after the Saudi Arabian club's team manager Hamad Al Sanie confirmed a deal has been agreed.

The former FIFA World Player of the Year will put pen to paper over the next couple of days on a 17-month contract, according to Al Sanie, after deciding to leave Serie A leaders Inter Milan.

"It's official now," Al Sanie said. 'Figo will sign Friday or Saturday and he'll arrive in Jeddah on January 5 when he'll join the team.'

Snaring a player of Figo's calibre will be an enormous coup for Middle Eastern football.

"We chose Figo because he's a big star and the coach of the team (Dmitri Davidovic) asked us to look for a midfielder and, after we suggested Figo to the coach, he welcomed the idea."

"The contract of Figo will be for 17 months but the fee is not disclosed."

Al Ittihad are historically one of the most successful teams in Saudi Arabia and are based in the Red Sea port city of Jeddah.

Juve in for Mascherano

INTERNET, undated

Juventus are set to make a move for unsettled West Ham midfielder Javier Mascherano.

According to Gazzetta Dello Sport, the Turin giants will meet the head of Media Sports Investment (the group that own Mascherano's registration) Kia Joorabchian to work out a deal that could be worth in the region of £5 million.

MSI brought Mascherano (along with Argentina colleague Carlos Tevez) to West Ham from Corinthians in August, as Joorabchian looked to take over the London club.

However, Mascherano has reportedly not settled in London, and has only made three league starts for the Hammers.

Juventus are currently unbeaten and sit in third place in Serie B, after

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Heat rising at the top

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson and Chelsea counterpart Jose Mourinho stepped up their war of words on Wednesday, each insisting that their side has control of their Premiership destiny.

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, in what he expects to be a tight race, Ferguson believes goal difference could play a key role in deciding this season's title.

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.

"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.

Mourinho, meanwhile, insisted United's lead was "no drama" for his side.

At the moment the Portuguese coach is just happy to keep in touch with United as they continue the busy holiday programme without the injured quartet of Petr Cech, John Terry, Joe Cole and Arjen Robben.

"Right now, we are surviving because the distance to Manchester

United is four points and that is not a drama," Mourinho said.

"I keep saying three points can be solved when we play United. But we are in a difficult situation, although I think we can survive."

Robben will be out until the New Year, while Cole, who has a fractured foot, may require surgery.

But Cech is expected back in January, a month earlier than scheduled, after the goalkeeper fractured his skull after a controversial challenge with Reading's Stephen Hunt in October.

Mourinho said: "For me, the biggest problem is to lose more than one player. If we lose one player in one position, we can still do it."

"For example, if we lose Joe Cole or Arjen Robben, we have cover. To lose two or three at the same time in one position makes life difficult."

"At the moment, we are conceding too many goals. We are doing what we can. We have two good left backs and two good right backs and we are using them well," the Blues

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Backers wont abandon Liverpool

Football

AFP, London

The company behind the proposed takeover of English football giants Liverpool insisted on Wednesday that they would have a long-term commitment to the club and are not interested in just a quick profit.

Dubai International Capital (DIC) say they have a long-term strategy which would include funds for new players and hit back at claims in the Daily Telegraph newspaper that they plan to sell the club in 2014.

A DIC source said: "What DIC is doing is planning to make sure

that, if a deal is done, Liverpool has the best possible funding in place going forward under DIC stewardship."

"This is particularly important as we would need to get on with the stadium early in 2007 and it takes time to sort out the necessary financing."

"This is also important in terms of making sure cash is available for the ongoing strengthening of the playing squad."

"Should DIC acquire the club, Liverpool will be well run, both on and off the pitch, and we are currently laying the groundwork to ensure that will be the case."

But DIC officials have pointed out they are yet to successfully

conclude their takeover of the club and that, as a result, talk of plans to sell it off for profit are premature.

"DIC has not yet formally made an offer, never mind completed a deal. Certainly there are no plans to exit an acquisition we have not even bought yet," added the source.

"It (DIC) is a very serious investor with considerable resources at its disposal and the ability to take a long-term view."

"Equally, we believe that we understand the responsibilities that come with owning Liverpool Football Club. DIC has made it clear that, should a deal be concluded, it would not interfere in the day-to-day running of the club."



Brazil and Barcelona star Ronaldinho (C) poses with friends and children in Porto Alegre on Wednesday during the inauguration of the Ronaldinho Institute. Ronaldinho launched the institute which will allow children from low income families to practice sports. PHOTO: AFP

Mourinho expects Porto ovation

AFP, Lisbon



February for the first knockout round of the Champions League.

"From those who have not forgotten my work at the club I expect applause and maybe even a standing ovation. From those who have forgotten those two years I expect whistles possibly accompanied by insults," he told Portuguese sports daily Record.

"But a match is nothing more than that, a match. It is 90 minutes and then it ends and we all go home," he added.

Mourinho, 43, coached Porto from 2002 to 2004. Under his guidance the Portuguese club won the UEFA Cup in 2003 and the Champions League in the following

year.

He faced FC Porto once before since he joined Chelsea in June 2004 - the two clubs were drawn together in the Champions League group stages in 2004/05 with the London team losing in Portugal but winning at home.

Mourinho added that Chelsea's Didier Drogba is the best striker in the English Premiership and the club would already be out of the race for all titles this season if it wasn't for its third-choice third keeper Hilario.

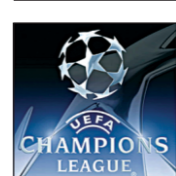
"No one at this moment comes near Drogba. Any ball he touches turns into gold. It's absolutely impressive," he told the newspaper.

Drogba, an Ivory Coast international, scored twice against Chelsea 2-2 at home draw against Reading on Boxing Day.

"Regarding Hilario I can say today that if I hadn't hired him I would have already lost all titles. Last season's third keeper would

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AFP, Paris



Champions League to three clubs if he wins election as UEFA president next month.

The former St Etienne and Juventus midfielder is challenging present UEFA chief Lennart Johansson for the powerful position with the election due on January 26. Johansson has been in the job since 1990.

In a five-point programme outlining his policy priorities, Platini said that he felt there were too many clubs from the big European leagues taking part in the continent's premier tournament.

At present, four teams from England, Spain and Italy qualify

for the lucrative Champions League with sides from smaller leagues having to battle through three qualifying rounds before reaching the group stages.

"I am in favour of setting a maximum of three clubs per country in order to allow more countries to be involved in the competition," Platini said in his programme.

The proposal has already sparked opposition from 18 wealthy European sides, including Barcelona, AC Milan, Chelsea, Bayern Munich and Lyon, who form the G14 lobby and they have made clear their preference for Johansson.

Platini has also vowed to ease the growing tensions between clubs and countries over the availability of players.

"Let's battle back against all the ills that threaten our sport - racism, xenophobia, shady financial deals, illegal betting, unscrupulous agents and doping," he said.



This undated handout picture showcases the new range of "Xqua" fleeces made by Italian fashion designer Alessandro Ferrari and inspired by Zinedine Zidane's infamous headbutt on Marco Materazzi in this year's World Cup final. The logo of the new range of leisurewear features a man headbutting another man. PHOTO: AFP