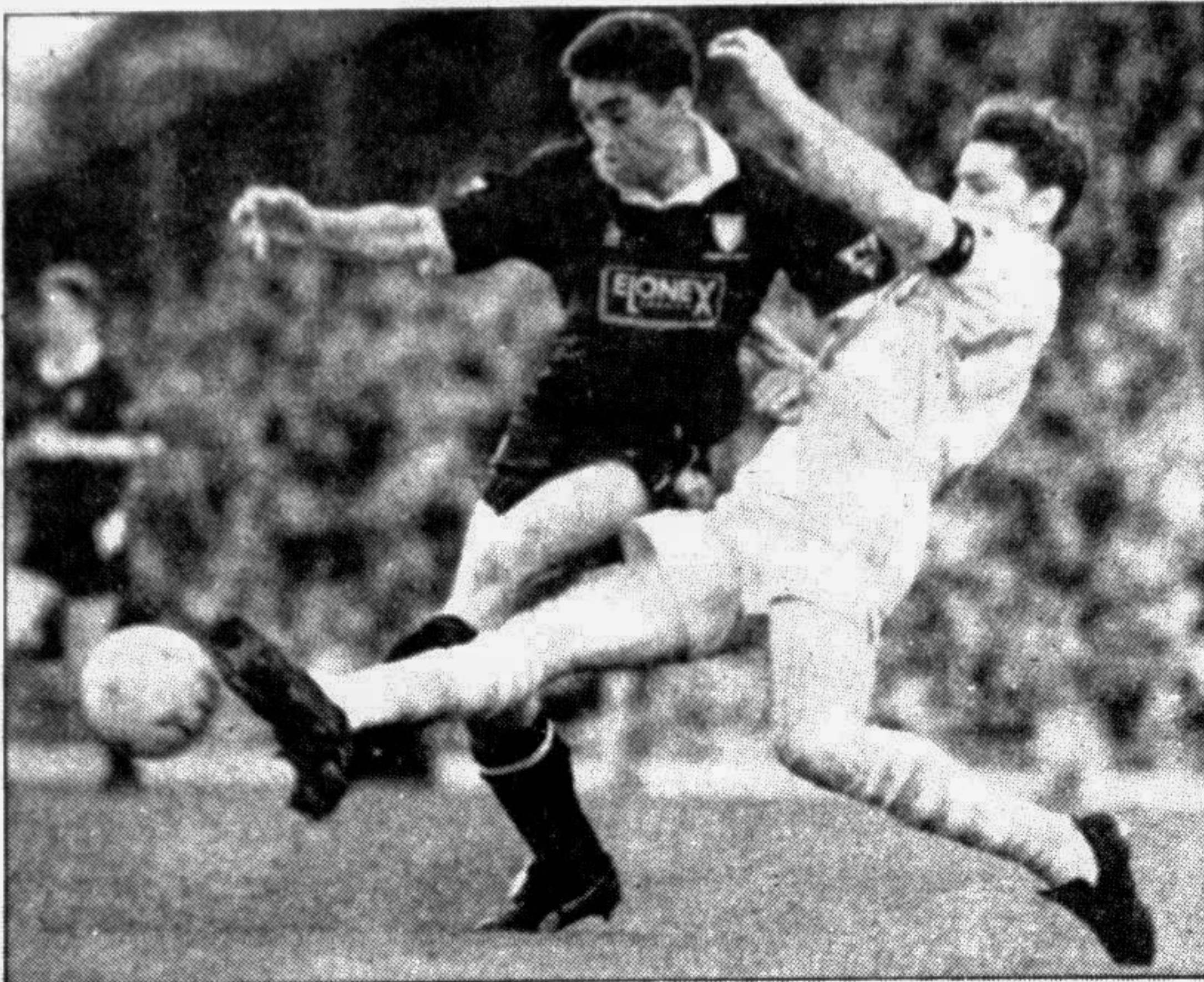


Sport



Arsenal's captain Tony Adams (L) tries to thwart Wimbledon's Jon Goodman during their English Premier League tie at Highbury on May 4. The match ended in a goalless draw. — AFP/UNB photo

Wimbledon hold Gunners

LONDON, May 5: Arsenal, who meet Real Zaragoza in the European Cup Winners' Cup final next week, will be looking for a vastly improved performance in Paris following their 0-0 draw against Wimbledon in a Premier League match on Thursday, reports Reuter.

Arsenal, resting Stefan Schwarz and Martin Kenown from their likely starting line-up, dominated tired Wimbledon, who were playing their third game in six days.

But they rarely threatened to pierce the visitors' defence, although Paul Merson spurned an easy chance to hit the winner nine minutes after half-time, firing tamely at goalkeeper Neil Sullivan.

Ian Wright missed three chances while Wimbledon, for whom Dean Holderworth might have scored twice in the first 10 minutes, eventually retreated into a defensive shell to complete fifth consecutive game without scoring.

Wimbledon agreed to play 48 hours ahead of schedule to help their London neighbours prepare for next week's final but were in no mood to give anything else away as they avoided defeat at Highbury for the eighth successive season.

A big crowd of nearly 33,000 suffered largely in silence as Arsenal, who have won only six home matches all season, laboured for the draw. But at least the fans had something to cheer at the end. Arsenal finished with no injury problems.

Lira Berlusconi's bane

ROME, May 5: The weakness of the Italian lira may help Paris-Saint Germain from losing Nigerian-born striker George Weah to defending European Cup and Italian League champions AC Milan, reports AP.

Silvio Berlusconi, the media tycoon and former premier who owns AC Milan, said Friday that the prices of foreign players have rocketed as a result of the falling lira and that will slow his club's transfer campaign.

Berlusconi confirmed the long-known interest of the five-time European and 14-time Italian league champion in Weah, but added "I can see problems in his transfer."

The value of foreign stars almost doubled in two years (as a result of the lira fall against most foreign currencies) ... it will be difficult for AC Milan to finalise (Weah's transfer), Berlusconi said during a meeting at Rome's foreign press club.

Weah, considered one of the best strikers playing in Europe, has a transfer value estimated between 16 billion and 20 billion lira (dls 10 million-12.5 million).

AC Milan, who eliminated Paris-Saint Germain in the European Champions Cup semifinals last month, are seeking a strong, skillful centre forward for next season with the comeback of long-injured Dutch striker Marco van Basten increasingly questionable.

Crystal Palace, another team with an anemic offence, try to stay alive Saturday in a home game against West Ham. Everton can erase their relegation fears with a home victory over Southampton, while Coventry can do the same at Ipswich.

Elsewhere Saturday, it's Leicester vs Chelsea and Queens Park Rangers vs Tottenham.

Batistuta battles Roma

ROME, May 5: One is hard to stop, the other hard to penetrate.

Something has to give Sunday as the Italian First Division's top scorer faces the stingiest defence when Gabriel Batistuta and Fiorentina play at AS Roma, reports AP.

In addition to pitting the Argentine striker against Italian international back Amadeo Carboni, the match has UEFA Cup qualification implications.

Batistuta began the season by eclipsing a 32-year-old Serie A record with at least one goal in 11 consecutive games. While his pace has slipped considerably, his 23 goals give him a margin of five over runner-up Gianfranco Zola of AC Parma.

Batistuta has proven himself adept at scoring in a variety of ways, and he works well with fellow forward Francesco Baiano.

With Carboni and goalkeeper Giovanni Cervone having career years, the Roma defence has allowed a league-low 20 goals through 29 matches. The club, in fourth place, has shut out five of their last six opponents.

But the Roma attack, which looked so promising at the outset of the season, is sputtering. Much of the blame goes to Uruguayan forward Daniel Fonseca's run of injuries.

Coach Carlo Mazzone's team has been shut out three of the past four rounds, as Argentine striker Abel Balbo has missed

Fonseca's creativity. Young forward Francesco Totti has shown signs of being a future star but lacks the consistency and playmaking ability Balbo needs.

Florentina's inexperienced defence has been as suspect as the Roma attack. It has given up six goals in the last two matches.



BATISTUTA

Roma midfielder Giovanni Placinti and Fiorentina forward Angelo Carboni are suspended for the match.

With five rounds left on the schedule, the top-tier teams already left in leaders Juventus' wake begin looking to qualify for the next UEFA Cup tournament.

Italy has four spots there, and no fewer than nine squads have a legitimate shot. Roma missed out on a berth by one standing point last season.

With leaders Juventus and

second-place Parma battling for the "scudetto," UEFA Cup and Italian Cup, and third-place AC Milan in the Champions' Cup final, it's possible that a team finishing as low as seventh — currently Fiorentina — would get a UEFA berth.

After beating Juve 1-0 Wednesday night in the UEFA final first leg, Parma resume their last-ditch effort to catch the Turin side in the league standings by hosting lowly Genoa.

If Coach Nevio Scala decides to concede the "scudetto," resting players for a push on the other two fronts against Juve, an upset is possible. Genoa are on the cusp of relegation, just one point out of 15th place in the 18-team league.

The visitors will surely provide a tough match, as they did last week in upsetting cross-town rivals Sampdoria 2-1 to end a five-match winless streak. But Genoa won't have defender Fabio Galante or Czech striker Tomas Skuhravy, both out suspended.

Parma are very strong at their Tardini Stadium, where they have won 12 to 14 league matches this season.

Juventus face much stiffer competition in fifth-place Lazio, who boast Italy's most potent attack with 59 goals. The Turin club's injury-riddled defence should have their hands full.

Other matches Sunday: Bari-Torino; Cagliari-Padova; Cremonese-Reggiana; Milan-Foggia; and Napoli-Internazionale.

Svensson rejects Bilbao's offer

STOCKHOLM, May 5: Tommy Svensson said on Thursday he had rejected an offer to manage Spain's Athletic Bilbao and would stay on as Sweden's coach until after next year's European Championship finals, reports Reuter.

Svensson said earlier this week that the Spanish side had made him "an incredibly good offer."

Bilbao are currently coached by former player Jose-Maria Amorrtu, seen as a caretaker manager.

Svensson, who guided Sweden to third place in last year's World Cup finals, said the Swedish Soccer Federation had told him it would not stand in his way if he wished to join the Spanish First Division club.

Sweden have struggled this year, losing two European Championship qualifiers.

Tyson denies charges

SOMERVILLE, New Jersey, May 5: Former world heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson has denied charges of sexual abuse by his ex-wife's former publicist, his attorney said, reports AFP.

A tentative trial date of June 12 is set on charges by Phylliss Polaner that Tyson sexually assaulted her, threatened her life and beat her in 1988.

"Every one of the allegations has been categorically denied by Mike and I believe a jury will find there is no cause for action," said John Trombadoro, one of the lawyers working for Tyson on the case.

The case was filed in 1990 but shelved when Tyson was sent to prison for the rape of beauty pageant contestant Desiree Washington, but reactivated after Tyson was released in March after serving a three-year sentence.

Polaner worked in 1988 for Tyson's then-wife, actress Robin Givens, who is named as a defendant along with her mother for failing to stop Tyson's abuse.

Sainz starts slowly

The first day of the Tour De Corse on Wednesday once again demonstrated the competitiveness of the 1995 World Rally Championship with over one minute covering the top ten cars as the rally reached the overnight halt at Bastia.

The 555 Subaru World Rally Team drivers held fifth, sixth and seventh places on this specialised all-asphalt event. Belgian driver Bruno Thiry led a World Championship event for the first time in his career and his closest challenger was Ford teammate Francois Delecour, only six seconds behind.

Drivers' championship leader, Carlos Sainz, made a quiet start and decided to change to a firmer suspension setting on his 555 Subaru Impreza before making an all-out attack on the lead.

Sandwiched between Sainz and McRae was the third 555 Subaru Impreza of Piero Liatti, the former European Rally Champion.



after eight special stages, says a press release.

Anybody's game in England

LONDON, May 5: Are the nerves beginning to show at the top of the English Premier League?

Blackburn, sitting comfortably in first place for weeks waiting to collect their first league title in 81 years, are suddenly showing the customary signs of pressure that accompany the end of the season. With two games to go, the long-awaited trophy presentation at Ewood Park is still on hold.

The Rovers have been — and still are — in control of their own destiny, but a 2-0 defeat at relegation-threatened West Ham on Sunday has given second-place and two-time defending champions Manchester United more than just a dreamer's chance of snatching the title on the last day of the season, reports AP.

"The title is still in our own hands," Blackburn manager Kenny Dalglish said. "People will inevitably say we are cracking up, but I don't care about that."

The mathematics of the title chase are getting simpler as the season draws to a close. Blackburn lead United by 5 points, but United have three games remaining to the Rovers' two. If United beat Sheffield Wednesday at home on Sunday, the lead will be just 2 points going into Blackburn's home game against Newcastle Monday night.

"How do I pick (the players) up for Newcastle?" Dalglish said. "Easy, I just tell them to look at the league table, that's the best pick-me-up of all. In games like this, with so much

at stake for both teams, you need a break at the vital time."

Should Manchester United lose on Sunday, Blackburn would clinch the title with a victory over Newcastle. United have had their own share of dubious results lately — including a 0-0 home draw against Chelsea on April 17 — and manager Alex Ferguson knows the Reds can't let up again.

"(Blackburn's) last two games, against Newcastle and Liverpool, are not easy," Ferguson said. "They will hope that we drop points to take the pressure off them, but if we win our games it means they can't afford to drop any more points."

After Sheffield Wednesday on Sunday and Southampton on Wednesday, United will play their final regular season game on May 14 at West Ham — the same place where Blackburn was done in last week.

Bubbling under the championship drama is the race for three UEFA Cup places in addition to the berth already secured by League Cup champions Liverpool. Nottingham Forest will secure their spot if they beat Manchester City at home on Saturday, while Newcastle and Leeds are also in strong positions.

Much depends on Manchester United, who will go to the Cup Winners' Cup if they fail to win the league title and then beat Everton in the Football Association Cup final on May 20.

In the battle to avoid relegation, a goal scored by Ugo Ehiogu's left hand may have kept Aston Villa in the Premier League for another season.

Ehiogu got away with using his hand to divert the ball in the net Wednesday night against Manchester City to score Villa's first goal in nearly 13 hours of playing time. The final score: 1-1.

"That might be the break our season needed," said Villa manager Brian Little, whose team host Liverpool on Saturday.

Villa are still precariously one spot above the four-team relegation zone. Ipswich and Leicester are already assured of the drop; Norwich and Crystal Palace still have a chance to avoid it, although Norwich will almost certainly be demoted if they lose their seventh straight game when they visit Leeds on Saturday.

"Everybody's writing us off, but Norwich have a great record have against Leeds and we'll keep going while there's a ghost of a chance," Norwich captain Jon Newson said.

Unfortunately, no one is left at Norwich to do the scoring following a massive sale of talent by team owners. Only two — Jeremy Goss and Neil Adams — of the 16 players who have scored goals for the Canaries this season are still with the club.

Crystal Palace, another team with an anemic offence, try to stay alive Saturday in a home game against West Ham. Everton can erase their relegation fears with a home victory over Southampton, while Coventry can do the same at Ipswich.

Elsewhere Saturday, it's Leicester vs Chelsea and Queens Park Rangers vs Tottenham.

Quarters quorum complete

TIANJIN, China, May 5: France, playing without injured world singles champion Jean-Philippe Gatien, booked a spot in the quarter-finals of the team event at the World Championships with a 3-0 win over Romania on Friday, reports Reuter.

Gatien injured a muscle in his left playing against Japan earlier in the competition and was rested by the European champions for the crunch match with Romania.

His teammates Patrick Chila, Christophe Legout and Damien Eloi were up to the task and put a smile on Gatien's face by winning the tie without dropping a game.

"I played on with the injury but it became worse so I decided to take a rest from competition — I am glad the team won without me," said Gatien, who has lost four times in the

team event. "I am confident that I will be ready for the knockout stage of the team competition but I will not be taking any risks."

The French were rewarded for their efforts with a good draw in the quarter-finals which will be played on Saturday. They will meet the winners of a play-off for a last eight spot and if victorious are likely to face Sweden, who they beat in the final of last year's European Championships in the semifinals.

"I am happy with the draw. I did not want to meet the Japanese in the quarter-finals as they beat us in the group," said French coach Christian Martin. "The team is very tired as we have had a lot of long matches against defensive teams. The matches have finished late and the players have only had about five hours sleep a night."

The draw for the last eight

also threw up an intriguing clash between defending champions Sweden and European rivals Germany. China, bidding to end their eight-year barren spell in the men's event, will face a play-off qualifier in the quarters with a semifinal showdown against informal Belgium or South Korea the reward for victory.

In the women's team event, South Korea had a surprise 3-1 win over Hong Kong on Friday to top group and they will meet Sweden in the quarter-finals.

The Swedes beat the Netherlands in their final Group A match to force Japan into the tricky play-off stage for the final two quarter-final spots.

Defending champions China, unbeaten in group play, will not know their last eight opponent until later on Friday although Germany are favoured to negotiate the play-off hurdle to take on the 10 times winners.

Meanwhile FA Cup finalists Everton dropped out of the hunt for the injury-prone England international midfielder who still interests Leeds and Coventry, especially as he could cost less than half the 5.5 million pounds (8.89 million dollars) sterling Lazio paid when they bought him from Tottenham three years ago.

"I'd like to sign him," said QPR's player-manager Ray Wilkins who plans to raise the issue with club owner Richard Thompson today.

"It would obviously depend to some extent on the fee, but if it is that which is being talked about in the newspapers then we are definitely interested."

Wilkins came close to landing Gascoigne in a loan deal before the English transfer deadline and added: "He'd be a super acquisition for us. He's the sort of player who generates excitement and brings in the crowds."

Lazio's managing director Dino Zoff has been in England this week, reportedly paving the way for Gazza's return.

Everton, however, say they have no interest in signing the player despite reports from Italy that they head the race.

Gascoigne, 28 this month, and hoping for an England recall for the summer tournament involving Brazil, Sweden and Japan, recently returned for Lazio after a year on the sidelines with a broken leg.

Leeds have contacted Lazio in the past about the player who launched his career at Newcastle.

QPR join Gazza race

LONDON, May 5: Queens Park Rangers became the latest English club to express an interest in Paul Gascoigne on Wednesday, if, as seems likely, he is released by his Italian club Lazio, reports Reuter.

Meanwhile FA Cup finalists Everton dropped out of the hunt for the injury-prone England international midfielder who still interests Leeds and Coventry, especially as he could cost less than half the 5.5 million pounds (8.89 million dollars) sterling Lazio paid when they bought him from Tottenham three years ago.

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Lifter's feat

WARSAW, May 5: Greek weightlifter Valerios Leonidis set a new clean and jerk world record in the 64kg category here on Thursday, when he lifted 183kgs at the European Championships, reports AFP.

The previous record stood at 182.5kgs, set by Turkey's Naim Suleymanoglu in November 1994 at Istanbul.

Leonidis, who has become only the third foreigner in the 46-year history of the award to be named England's footballer-of-the-year, said:

"The tremendous reception I have had from fans of other teams as well as Tottenham's has been fantastic. It is very special when the other team's fans applaud you as they did at Newcastle last night. Really it has been an incredible season for me."

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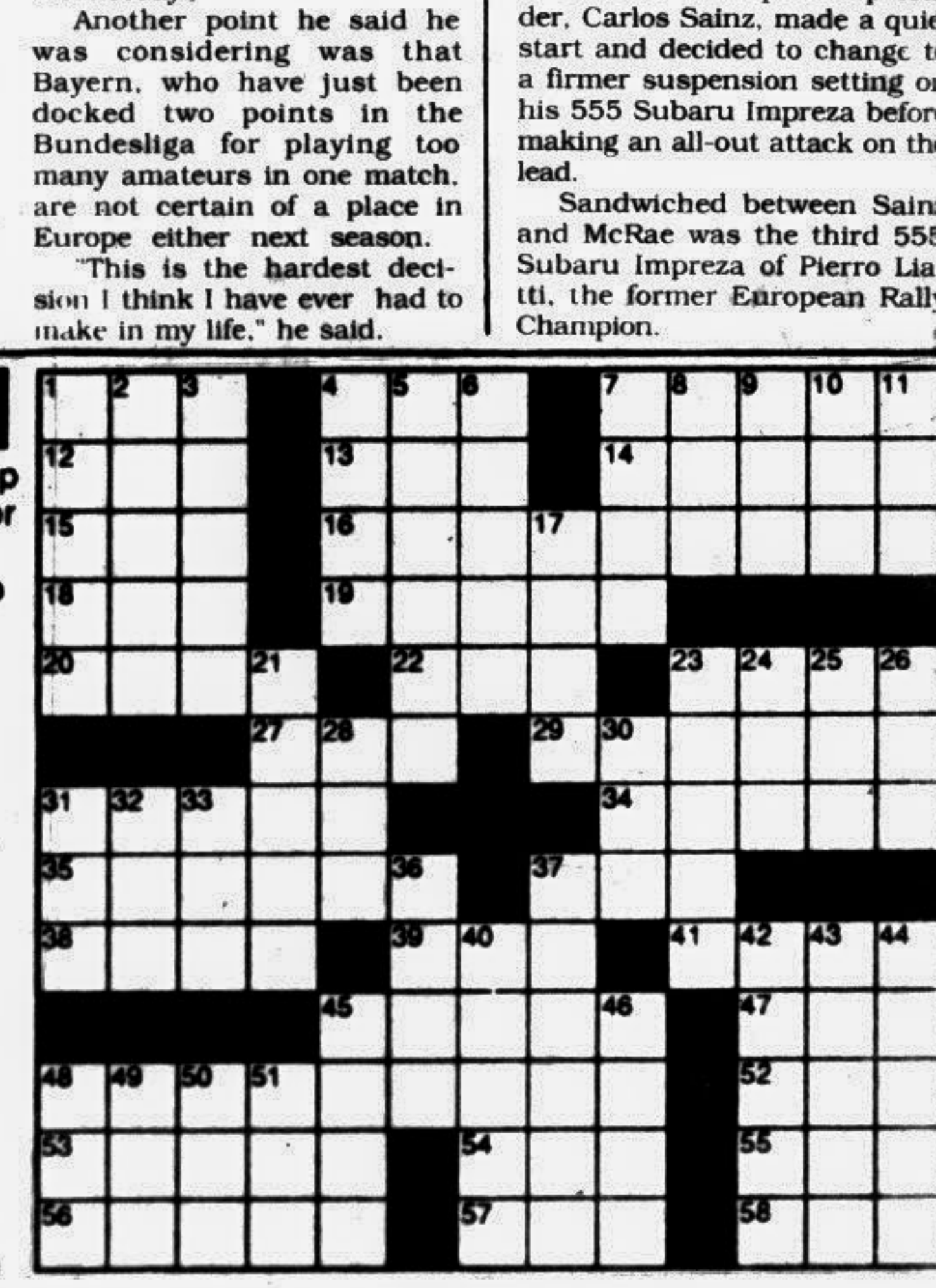
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CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

- ACROSS 1 Buddy 47 History 2 Roughly 25 Spy author 3 Sill 16 17 4 Apprehends 26 Have a go at it 5 Inhuman 28 Infinitesimal 6 He's not himself today 30 Spoon-bender 7 Eponym of London's bobbies 31 "Cabaret" lyricist 8 Stick 32 Pair 9 Fond du —, Wis. 33 "Born in the —" 10 Baton Rouge sch. 37 Statesman-financier Bernard 21 Treaties 40 Drop in on 23 Put on 42 Mediterranean three-master 24 Erstwhile 43 Bakery come-on 44 Sorcerer 45 Piquancy 46 Duel tool 48 Go after an apple 49 Where (Latin) From A — 50 From A — 51 Place-kicking gadget



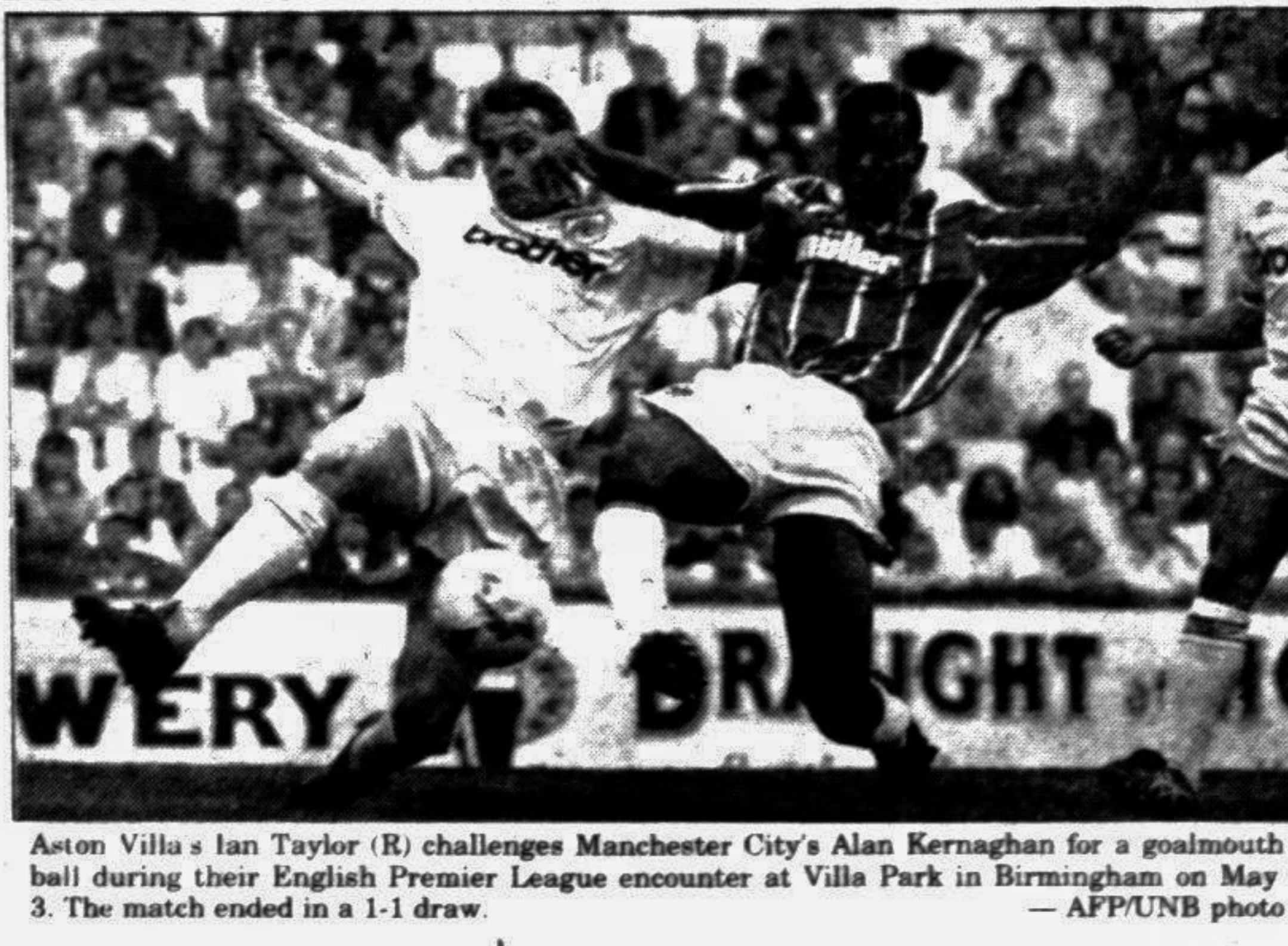
CRYPTOQUIP

G N J E E J Y V O B E J G N P L H N H T M N K T T N K T C G O B M V C P L H A A C E

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: THE FAVORITE TELEVISION SHOW UNDERWATER: "EEL OF FORTUNE."

Today's Cryptoquip clue: E equals R

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals G, then X 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.



Aston Villa's Ian Taylor (R) challenges Manchester City's Alan Kernaghan for a goalmouth ball during their English Premier League encounter at Villa Park in Birmingham on May 3. The match ended in a 1-1 draw. — AFP/UNB photo