

Sport

Euro qualifier
Owen, Beckham
doubtful

LONDON, Mar 22 (AP): Eng-land's two biggest stars could miss the most critical game for the national side this year.

Michael Owen and David Beckham head the injury list as England manager Kevin Keegan prepares his team for Saturday's crucial 2000 European Championship qualifier against Poland at Wembley.

Liverpool's 19-year-old striker Owen has a persistent hamstring injury which has not responded to treatment and Beckham was forced to leave the field Saturday with a calf-muscle injury during Manchester United's 3-1 win over Everton.

Owen and Beckham were expected to have further medical exams on Monday as the practices for Saturday's key match.

Other players under an injury cloud were recalled Blackburn striker Chris Sutton, Sheffield Wednesday defender Andy Hinchcliffe, Leeds midfielder David Batty and reserve keeper Nigel Martyn.

Sjoberg says
goodbye

STOCKHOLM, Mar 22: Former world high jump record-holder Patrik Sjoberg announced his retirement from athletics on Sunday, reports AP.

"The Swede injured his back in 1997 during a made-for-TV superstars competition in Sweden and has competed sparsely since."

"It (the back) hurts more if I train a lot, which I have done," Sjoberg told Swedish channel TV4. "Sometimes, I can't sleep."

Sjoberg set a world record of 2.42 metres (7.94 feet) at Stockholm's Olympic Stadium in 1987. Only current world-record holder Javier Sotomayor of Cuba has jumped higher than Sjoberg.

Sjoberg won the gold medal at the 1987 World Championships in Rome and medaled in three straight Olympics. He won a silver in 1984, a bronze in 1988 and a silver again in 1992. He was injured shortly before the 1996 Atlanta Games and did not compete.

"Missing the gold medal is my biggest regret," Sjoberg said. "I've never been in better shape than I was before Atlanta. I felt that I finally could have won the gold there."

After Atlanta, Sjoberg came back to win the Grand Prix finals before injuring his back in 1997.

NATO alert at
Balkan soccer

GENEVA, Mar 22 (Reuters/Internet): UEFA said on Monday it was considering postponing, or moving two European championship qualifying matches involving Yugoslavia and Macedonia because of the possibility of NATO air strikes.

Yugoslavia are scheduled to play Croatia in Belgrade and Macedonia are due to face Ireland in Skopje on Saturday, both games in group eight.

UEFA said it would announce its decision on Tuesday and was considering either holding the matches at a neutral venue or postponing them until late April.

The uncertainty is a result of NATO considering military action against Belgrade over Kosovo following the collapse of peace talks and the pull-out from Kosovo of OSCE monitors.

The Irish squad are due to fly to Macedonia on Thursday and a Football Association of Ireland spokesman said: "We have got to be assured that everything will be safe."

Ireland Manager Mick McCarthy said he was preparing his team in the expectation that the game would go ahead.

"What's happening in Kosovo is very sad but until somebody in authority tells us to the contrary, we must assume that the match is on," the Irish Times quoted him as saying.

Ireland's match against Yugoslavia scheduled for last October was postponed at the time because NATO countries were considering military action.

UEFA said on Monday it will also discuss Wales' request to play Denmark in a group one clash in Cardiff, not the English city of Liverpool.

Russia's soccer chief said on Monday they would comply with a UEFA demand to move their next home European qualifier from Vladikavkaz to Moscow.

"It's now official -- we will host Andorra at the Lokomotiv Stadium in Moscow," president of the Russian Football Union Vyacheslav Koloskov told the news agency.

A bomb explosion at Vladikavkaz's main market killed more than 50 people on Friday, raising doubts over match safety.

Lazio remain five points clear



ROME, Mar 22 (Reuters/Internet): Leaders Lazio made short work of Venezia on Sunday with goals in the opening 15 minutes from Sergio Conceicao and free kick specialist Sinisa Mihajlovic sealing their eighth successive victory at the Olympic stadium.

Inter Milan are looking for a new manager for the second time this season after Romanian Mircea Lucescu resigned following his side's 4-0 defeat at Sampdoria and Wednesday's exit from the European Cup quarter-finals.

Lazio retain their five-point advantage in Serie A over Fiorentina who recovered from the second-half dismissal of Czech defender Thomas Repka to beat Piacenza 2-1 with a last minute goal from Carmine Esposito.

But Parma's title hopes suffered a blow with a 2-1 defeat at fifth-place Udinese for whom Brazilian Marcio Amoroso scored an 88th minute winner.

With eight matches remaining, Lazio have 55 points ahead of Fiorentina on 50, Milan on 48 and Parma with 47.

Lazio's early nerves were settled by Conceicao with a volley off overlapping defender Giuseppe Favalli's eighth minute cross.

Mihajlovic, who has now scored seven of his eight goals this season direct from free kicks, added a superb second from a dead-ball situation in the 14th minute to ensure Lazio equal last season's club record of 16 league matches without defeat.

Fielding Edmundo and Gabriel Batistuta together for the first-time since February quickly paid off for Fiorentina.

After just six minutes Batistuta seized on a defensive mistake to claim his 19th goal of the season -- and his first since returning from five weeks out with a knee injury.

But the Fiorentina side's title challenge badly lost its way in the second half as first Simone Inzaghi levelled the scores with a 72nd minute penalty and then Repka was sent off.

In the dying seconds, however, German Jorg Heinrich raced to the by-line before crossing for Esposito's last gasp winner.

Parma looked to have salvaged a point after fighting back from Argentine Roberto Sosa's 23rd minute opener and the dismissal of Italy defender Fabio Cannavaro to equalise with a thunderous free kick from Paolo Vanoli in the 69th minute.

But Amoroso escaped Luigi Sartor in the final minutes to

beat Gianluigi Buffon. AC Milan's title hopes were also jolted when Yksel Osmanovski's second goal of the match put Bari 2-1 up with 11 minutes left at the San Siro. But Maurizio Ganz's injury-time penalty grabbed a 2-2 draw for the home side.

Udinese's victory lifts them into fifth-place, a point ahead of Juventus and AS Roma who shared a 1-1 draw at Turin.

European Cup semifinalists Juventus looked destined for their first defeat in eight matches under new manager Carlo Ancelotti when Marco Delvecchio headed Roma in front. But defender Mark Iuliano equalised 17 minutes later.

At the San Siro, Milan made the worst possible start as Osmanovski seized on a miscued sliding tackle from Alessandro Costacurta to put Bari into a fifth minute lead.

German Oliver Bierhoff equalised before halftime but the home side were ruining a series of misses when German Christian Ziege presented Osmanovski with his second in the 80th minute.

Like Fiorentina, however, Milan's title hopes were kept alive with last-ditch offensive as Duccio Innocenti handed in the area and Ganz converted the penalty.

Manchester
United stay
top

LONDON, Mar 22(Reuters/Internet): Manchester United took time to find their touch but were still too good for Everton in a 3-1 win at Old Trafford that kept the European Cup semifinalists four points clear of Arsenal in the English Premier League on Sunday.

Chelsea maintained their pursuit with a 3-0 win at Aston Villa, two goals coming from Norwegian Tore Andre Flo with Dane Bjarne Goldback supplying the third. The Blues moved back into third place ahead of Leeds United, but were seven points off the lead.

At Old Trafford Manchester United were entitled to look weary after their 1-1 draw at Inter Milan on Wednesday which enabled them to reach the European Cup semifinals.

Everton, desperate for points to escape from the relegation zone, offered little but a tight defence. United had the sharpness of Norwegian striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer to thank for the first goal in the 55th minute.

The ball control of Dwight Yorke created the chance for Solskjaer's 11th premier league goal, and Yorke was again involved as England defender Gary Neville scored a rare goal for 2-0 in the 64th minute.

United, unbeaten in 19 games, built the platform for England forward David Beckham to end his goal drought of the past 25 matches with a perfectly placed free kick after 67 minutes.

Everton reduced the deficit when Don Hutchison struck a powerful free kick past Peter Schmeichel in the 80th minute.

At Villa Park, Chelsea did not manage to convert their superiority into goals until the 59th minute.

Flo produced a match-winning performance and was on target to make it 1-0, then set up Goldback for 2-0 four minutes from time.

Flo also had the last word, giving Chelsea a 3-0 win in injury time.

Villa, Premier League leaders early in the season, suffered their fifth successive home defeat and have taken just one point from their last eight games.

On Saturday, Arsenal produced another solid performance to underline their championship defence, beating Coventry 2-0 at Highbury.

Goals by midfielder Ray Parlour and Dutch forward Marc Overmars in the 16th and 80th minutes kept alive the north Londoners hopes of completing a league and FA Cup double for the second year in succession.

Manchester United improved their points tally to 63 at the top from 30 games. Arsenal were on 59 and Chelsea, with a game in hand, had 56, two ahead of Leeds United in fourth.

Ferguson
fired up?

MANCHESTER, Mar 22: After going unbeaten in six games in an arduous 18-day schedule -- including FA Cup and European Champions' Cup quarter-final triumphs -- Alex Ferguson says Manchester United can win a historic triple, reports AP.

The Old Trafford manager, speaking after United's 3-1 win over Everton Sunday, said he was confident of winning the Premier League title, FA Cup and European Champions' Cup.

"The evidence of the last 18 days when we have... done so well is excellent," he said.

Manchester United have gone unbeaten in 19 matches, including nine wins and one draw in 10 league games, and have a four-point lead at the top over Arsenal with eight league games to play.

Next month the Reds face an FA Cup semifinal against defending league and FA Cup titlists Arsenal and a European Champions' Cup semifinal against Juventus finalists the last three seasons.

The Champions' Cup semifinal, set up with a 3-1 aggregate win over Inter Milan, will be played over two legs on April 7 and April 21. Manchester United last won the European title in 1968.

United could become the first to win England's league and FA Cup along with Europe's most prestigious club title in one season.

Liverpool came close in 1984, winning the league, League Cup and European Cup. The League Cup is England's second cup but far less valued than the FA Cup.

"We are looking very powerful, very strong. I can see the players approaching the games in the right way," Ferguson said.

"They are focusing on winning every game, and the evidence of how they are going about it is very encouraging."

"A lot of them are off on international duty now -- some will play, some won't -- but I hope they will come back in a fortnight looking very strong for the run-in."

V'ball training
camp ends

COMILLA, Mar 22: A 12-day training camp on volleyball, organised by the District Women Sports Association, concluded at the local gymnasium today, reports APB.

A total of 26 girls from different schools and colleges in the district took part in the training conducted by national volleyball coach Farida Begum.

A district women's volleyball team has been formed with 12 selected participants to take part in divisional level competitions.



ANIMAL LOVER: German tennis queen Steffi Graf caresses a stray dog, which she found while watching a Miami Heat basketball match earlier this week, at her hotel in Florida March 21.

Rafter's poor run continues



KEY BISCAVINE Florida, Mar 22 (AP/Reuters/APF): The stadium was nearly full for Patrick Rafter's match at the Lipton Championships, and the two-time reigning US Open champion put on a good show.

Rafter lunged for volleys and leaped for overheads. He sprawled to the hardcourt after one ball and twice hit shots with his back to the net -- one over the shoulder, another between the legs. Even the changeovers were exciting, with girls in the crowd eagerly awaiting Rafter's next shirt change.

Yes, the Australian heart-throb looks good losing.

Shake a slump Sunday, dropping his third-round grudge match to Nicolas Kiefer, 7-6, 6-4. Rafter's record slipped to 5-6 this year, and he has yet to reach a quarterfinal in six tournaments.

"I'm getting used to it," he said. "I don't enjoy it. I'm hitting the ball okay, but what I'm really doing badly is my shot selection. I've got to play percentage tennis. I'm not playing that, especially on the big points."

It was a dismal day for Aussies. Mark Philippoussis, seeded 10th, lost to Marat Safin 7-6, 7-6. Jason Stoltenberg, hurt by two overrules from the chair umpire in the next-to-last game, lost to top-ranked Carlos Moya 6-7, 6-1, 7-5.

Defending champion Marcelo Rios of Chile, playing his first confident tennis since missing most of the first two months of the year with a back injury, advanced 6-3, 6-4 over Byron Black of Zimbabwe.

Pete Sampras, bidding to reclaim the No. 1 ranking this week, was happy to beat Jonas Bjorkman 7-5, 6-3, but annoyed to be scheduled for the Grandstand Court Monday rather than the stadium where he plays Albert Costa.

"I haven't played on the Grandstand in years," Sampras said. "How many Slams do you have to win to get on Stadium Court at this tournament? That's a shock."

Monday's schedule was completed before Sampras beat Bjorkman. Officials apparently didn't want to risk having Bjorkman on the Stadium Court, and television requests for other matches were a consideration, tournament referee Alan Mills said.

The Sampras-Costa match might yet be moved to the Stadium, depending on the length of other matches scheduled there, Mills said.

Unseeded Vince Spadea, the only other American left in the men's draw, swept Fabrice Santoro 6-3, 6-2 Sunday. Also advancing to the fourth round were No. 4 Alex Corretja, No. 7 Richard Krajicek.

It was a mixed day for British tennis fans as sixth-seeded Tim Henman lost a heartbreaking match, but 12th-seeded Greg Rusedski moved into the fourth round.

Henman fell to Frenchman Jerome Golmard 6-4, 7-6, while Rusedski beat Hendrik Dreek-

man of Germany 6-3, 6-4. In women's action, favourites Martina Hingis, Monica Seles and Steffi Graf all posted wins.

The top-seeded Hingis won a 6-1, 6-1 match against American Amy Frazier, the third-seeded Seles, topped former Wimbledon champion Conchita Martinez 6-2, 6-1, and seventh-seeded Graf, a finalist last week at the Evert Cup, secured a 6-1, 6-3 win over Slovakian Henrieta Nagyova.

However, women's action was highlighted by the night match between second seeded American Lindsay Davenport and Italy's Silvia Farina.

In day matches, France's Australian Open finalist Amelie Mauresmo was stunned by Russian Elena Likhovseva 4-6, 7-6, 6-1.

Men's tennis in the United States badly needs a popularity boost, and the 26-year-old Rafter seems just the guy to provide it. He has personality, sex appeal, an all-court game and two Grand Slam tournament titles.

But aside from the US Open, he has won only two other tournaments in the States and it's been five years since he advanced beyond the third round at Lipton.

Ranked No. 5 despite his slump, Rafter squandered a chance to come away from Key Biscayne with the top ranking.

"I just need some matches," he said. "I'm doing the training and feel I'll be hitting the ball well. Now I need to get some wins."

Not even the motivation of bad blood seems to spark Rafter. He lost to Kiefer two weeks ago at Indian Wells in a match that produced hard feelings. Worlds were exchanged over the net, and Rafter later complained that Kiefer was too cocky.

The rematch produced no fireworks, however, just the same outcome.



Ajax Amsterdam's Dutch international goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar is wrong-footed by Vitesse Arnhem's Machlas during the league opener at Amsterdam on March 21. Vitesse won 1-0.

Inter crisis claims Lucescu



ROME, Mar 21 (Reuters/Internet): Romanian Mircea Lucescu resigned as Inter Milan manager on Sunday after a 4-0 thrashing by Sampdoria and the club's exit from the European Cup at the hands of Manchester United.

Lucescu was only a part-time replacement for the sacked Gigi Simoni but his departure puts a question mark over Inter president Massimo Moratti's dream of following in the footsteps of father Angelo in the 1960s and re-creating "Il Grande Inter".

"This is life. I would prefer that all responsibility is attributed to me so that the club can finish the season in the best shape," Lucescu said.

"I am leaving because I no longer have the basis to continue to work. You all saw the match and what happened."

Lucescu delivered his resignation to Sandro Mazzola, responsible for Inter's transfer dealings, before telephoning Moratti in New York.

According to agency reports, Moratti accepted Lucescu's resignation although the club will not officially announce his departure until Moratti returns from New York on Monday.

Inter are ninth with 36 points, 19 behind leaders Lazio, and their chances of qualifying for European competition next year are diminishing by the game. Their loss to Sampdoria means they have gone six league games without a win and 10 games in all.

With Marcello Lippi expected to arrive in the summer, Inter's goalkeeper trainer Luciano Castellini is tipped to take over as caretaker for the last eight matches of the season.

Castellini filled the same role for the final two games of the 1996-97 season following the resignation of Roy Hodgson.

Moratti senior hired and fired six managers before finally settling on Helenio Herrera and the 'catenaccio' tactics which took Inter to two European Cup triumphs.

Lucescu is Inter's sixth managerial casualty in Moratti II's five-year reign, so the current president could argue he is still on course to mirror his father's achievements.

But questions are increasingly being asked as to whether even the managerial skills of Lippi, the former Juventus coach, can take the great club back to the summit.

After Wednesday's elimination from the European Cup quarter-finals, Inter's season ticket holders turned their wrath not just on the players but, for the first time, on Moratti.

Moratti was the first to suggest the real cause of Inter's crisis lay far beyond the control of a manager.

"I am particularly angry with myself because I am the first person responsible for Inter," said Moratti.

"I also want to see who has been pretending to work and who has been working seriously."

Glazzetta dello Sport this week claimed the president had surrounded himself with too many advisors and Moratti no longer knew whom to listen to.

Hodgson, who coached Inter from 1995 to 1997, said: "There are too many people who want to be king at Inter."

Simoni, Lucescu's predecessor, said much the same after his dismissal last December and whoever advised Moratti to sack Simoni just days after the club qualified for the European Cup quarter-finals made a bad mistake.

Simoni's team, which finished second last year and won the UEFA Cup, were fiercely loyal to the coach.

The strength of that loyalty was apparent in Lucescu's first match in charge when Nigerian defender Tanbo West threw his shirt at the Romanian after being substituted.

"I have had difficulties working with this team," admitted Lucescu last Thursday.

Moratti likes to argue that the absence of the injured Ronaldo has weighed heavily on Inter's season.

"If we had been able to count on Ronaldo," he said on Thursday, "things would have been different."

But sceptics suggest that the seeds of Inter's current destiny were not planted on the playing fields of France where Ronaldo sustained his knee injury but in Moratti's office.

In his quest to win with the style and panache of his father's "Il Grande Inter", Moratti has laid out millions of dollars to put the likes of Ronaldo, Roberto Baggio, Youri Djorkaeff and Ivan Zamorano into the black-and-blue stripes.

But why, ask critics, was no defender bought last summer to replace the 35-year-old Giuseppe Bergomi?

Even when Croat Dario Simic was signed in January -- too late to play in Europe -- Moratti's insistence that Lucescu bring out the best of the strike talent at his disposal only compounded the errors of last summer's transfer campaign.

Boxer put
in hospital

BUENOS AIRES, Mar 22: Argentine welterweight Jorge Alvarez was in intensive care on Sunday bout against the Dominican Republic's Jose Rosa Gomez, local media reported, says Reuters.

Doctors said they had operated on Alvarez for three hours.



American Monica Seles in action against Conchita Martinez of Spain at the Lipton Championships on March 21.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

CROSSWORD puzzle grid and clues. Includes sections for ACROSS, DOWN, and CRYPTOQUIP.

CRYPTOQUIP puzzle grid and solution. Includes the text: "Yesterday's Cryptquip: I WONDER IF THIS SORCERER MIGHT BE LABELED A CHARMING FELLOW."