

Gunners hot on MU's heels

LONDON, Apr 7: Arsenal kept their Premier League title hopes bubbling by moving within one point of Manchester United with a 1-0 home victory over Blackburn on Tuesday in a match that saw two men sent off, reports Reuters.

Dennis Bergkamp scored the goal that mattered in the 42nd minute with a rebound off his own free kick, and though he missed a second half penalty, the reigning champions had all they needed to keep the pressure on United even though they have played one game more.

United are on 64 points with Arsenal on 63, four clear of third placed Chelsea. Blackburn defended resolutely for most of the first half until they conceded the vital free kick. Bergkamp's effort was poor and struck the wall at knee level, but the rebound came back to him and he made no mistake with a left foot shot that beat John Filan into the far corner.

In the 83rd minute after he was pulled down in the box by Keith Gillespie, Bergkamp had a chance to make it 2-0 but Filan dived low to his left to make the save.

The defeat left Blackburn mired in the relegation zone, one position above the third from bottom club only on goal difference. Two players were sent off, Martin Keown in the 60th minute for a second bookable offence and Gillespie for his foul on Bergkamp that led to the missed penalty.

In the other Premier League game, Leicester scored twice in the last 30 minutes to salvage a 2-2 draw with former leaders Aston Villa, who have now gone 11 games without a victory.

Villa looked likely to come out of their slump when they took a 2-0 lead early in the second half. Lee Hendrie had given them an 80-second lead and Julian Joachim made it 2-0 right after the break.

But Leicester delighted their home fans with a spirited recovery which was rewarded when Robbie Savage in the 62nd minute and Tony Cottee in the 71st struck to salvage a point.

Kournikova once again snubs Russia

MOSCOW, Apr 7 (Reuters/Internet): Anna Kournikova has once again refused to play for Russia in the Fed Cup tennis competition, a senior official said on Wednesday.

Kournikova, Russia's top player, will not play in the world group first round in Moscow against France in Moscow later this month, Russian Tennis Federation vice-president Alexander Kalivadov told the news agency.

"We made an invitation to Kournikova which she declined. She simply said that she will not play, without specifying the reason," Kalivadov said.

Kournikova, who lives in the United States, has refused to play for Russia several times in the past two years, each time citing injury.

"I either her wrist or her hand or her back," Kalivadov said recently.

"I don't think there could have been a single part in her body that hasn't been injured when it comes to playing for Russia. But as soon as the next tournament comes up she is healthy and playing again."

Seventeen-year-old Kournikova, ranked 16th in the world, is currently playing in a tournament in Amelia Island, Florida.

In her absence, Russia will rely on 23rd-ranked Yelena Likhovtseva, Yelena Makarova, Tatjana Panova and Australian Open junior champion Yelena Dementyeva in the tie with France on April 17 and 18.

Dutch prince to resume IOC job

THE HAGUE, Apr 7 (Reuters/Internet): Dutch Crown Prince Willem-Alexander can take up his work on the International Olympic Committee now that it has taken steps to reform.

Prime Minister Wim Kok said. In a letter to parliament released on Wednesday, Kok said he was satisfied the IOC had taken sufficient steps to root out corruption and he believed there was no longer any danger that the prince's involvement with the organisation would be smirched by the royal name.

The government advised the prince to suspend his IOC activities in February amid allegations that some committee members had accepted bribes from cities bidding to host the Olympic Games in return for their votes.

Last month the IOC expelled six members and warned a further nine. Four others had resigned soon after the allegations surfaced.

The IOC also announced it would set up an ethics committee and reform the procedure for choosing Olympic cities, beginning with the 2006 Winter Games.

"The IOC has responded in a clear way. It has made a fresh start and there is every sign that faith in the integrity of the IOC will be restored," Kok wrote in the letter delivered to parliament late on Tuesday.

Willem-Alexander, a sports enthusiast, was elected to the IOC during the 1998 Nagano Winter Games. Kok's letter clears the way for him to resume his membership in June, as previously planned.

"As a result of the measures taken by the IOC there is no reason to change our initial decision on the crown prince's membership. We believe he will make a contribution to the future of a rejuvenated IOC," Kok said.

Parma take healthy advantage



MADRID, Apr 7: Atletico Madrid were left to regret a series of bad defensive errors and bad luck as Parma took a 3-1 advantage back to Italy after the clubs UEFA Cup semifinal first leg on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Parma, the 1995 winners, took an early lead after Lilian Thuram made a stunning run down the left wing after 13 minutes.

The French World Cup player found Juan Sebastian Veron unmarked close by and the Argentine international crossed to the feet to Enrico Chiesa for him to chip the ball over the stranded Atletico goalkeeper Francisco Molina and into the net.

Atletico got back on equal terms from a dubious penalty eight minutes later.

Juninho made one of his characteristic runs through the middle and got the ball across to Jose Mari Romero.

The Spanish international appeared to stumble to the ground without being touched when challenged by Thuram but

the Russian referee gave a penalty and Juninho had no problems from the spot. Atletico briefly had the better of the game but in the closing stages of the first half Parma got back on top again, an advantage they never relinquished.

Thuram had a shot parried away by Molina after a 40-metre run through a barrage of Atletico defenders, but Heman Crespo was on hand to head the ball into the net.

The goal was disallowed but Chelsea second goal shortly afterwards, five minutes from the break, could not be disputed.

Veron's corner was headed onto the crossbar by the Italian international striker but he reacted quickly enough to be on hand to stab the ball into the net at the second time of asking.

Parma nearly had another just after halftime when a thunderous shot by Crespo from 25 metres could only be punched away by Molina.

However, the Argentine international was not to be denied his place on the scoresheet.

A poor Atletico clearance from a corner came to the feet of

Parma captain Roberto Sensi, who found Crespo to finish off the move on 61 minutes after Parmas third of the night.

Juninho should have closed the gap from the penalty spot again after Vladimir Jugovic was brought down after 77 minutes but a weak shot from the Brazilian was saved by Gianluigi Buffon in the Parma goal, capping an excellent night for the young keeper.

The victory was Parma's first away win in this season's UEFA Cup and also Atletico's first loss at home in the competition.

Atletico's coach Radomir Antic, who returned to the club two weeks ago after being sacked at the end of last season, put on a philosophical air after the emphatic defeat which leaves the Spanish side with an uphill task if they are to turn the tie around.

"It's too soon to make radical changes to the way this side plays," Antic said.

"I liked what we did when we were attacking but there were just too many defensive mistakes."

Marseille held at home

MARSEILLE, France, Apr 7: Bologna confirmed they can battle into a European final when they held Olympique Marseille 0-0 in a lacklustre UEFA Cup semifinal opening leg at the Stade Velodrom on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Despite throwing almost everyone forward in the second half, Marseille failed to break the Italian side whose defence was simply too tight for an unimaginative home team.

The closest Marseille went to breaking the deadlock was in the 74th minute when Fabrizio Ravanelli volleyed a cross by Robert Pires from close range narrowly wide.

"We were too shy in the first half and they deserved to be ahead before the break" said Marseille coach Roland Courbis. "We had a good second half and everything is still to be done."

"It's not a good result as a 2-1 victory would have been but both the Italians and US are in the same situation, we will have to score a goal if we don't want to go to penalties in the second leg."

Bologna had the first chance of scoring in the fourth minute through midfielder Davide Fontolan.

Towering Swedish striker Kenneth Andersson found compatriot Klas Ingegsson with a header and his 25 metre shot was well saved by goalkeeper Stephane Porato in the 20th.

Marseille, surprised by Bologna's attacking start, tried to react but Ravanelli shot wide six minutes later.

"We failed to impose ourselves, they (Bologna) were not brilliant but they came here to draw and they defended perfectly," said Marseilles French international striker Christophe Dugarry, "even keeping the ball required tremendous efforts."

Bologna coach Carlo Mazzone remained cautious when asked about his teams chances of reaching the final in Moscow next month.

"I have a lot of respect for Marseille," he said. "My players were very brave tonight because some of them were back from injury and were not fit to play 90 minutes."

"Mentally the second leg will be very different from tonight, we can expect a tense game, it's still quite a long way to Moscow."



125cc motorcycle world champion Valentino Rossi (R) shows a number nine Inter Milan jersey presented to him by superstar Ronaldo at Inter's training ground in Appiano Gentile on April 6. Rossi was on a visit to the soccer giants' headquarters. — AFP photo



Juan Veron (R), Parma's Argentine star, and teammates celebrate a goal during the Italian team's 3-1 victory over Atletico Madrid in their UEFA Cup semifinal first-leg encounter at Madrid on April 6. — AFP photo

Posh threat for royals

LONDON, Apr 7 (Reuters/Internet): The wedding of Britain's Prince Edward and Sophie Rhys-Jones may be upstaged by the tying of the knot between England soccer star David Beckham and the Spice Girls pop group's Victoria Adams, popularity known as Posh Spice.

So says the Times, traditionally regarded as the newspaper of Britain's establishment.

The royal wedding is due to be held at Windsor Castle near London on June 19, while Beckham and Posh Spice plan to marry on July 4, probably in Ireland.

Prince Edward had expressed a wish his wedding should be much lower key than those of his brothers Prince Charles and Prince Andrew, but Beckham and Posh Spice were showing no inhibitions about keeping their quiet, the Times said on Wednesday.

Martin Townsend, editor of OK! magazine which has done a one million pounds (\$1.59 million) deal to secure exclusive access to the Beckham-Posh Spice wedding, told the newspaper: "Edward and Sophie have played it down so much that people simply aren't as interested as they are in Posh Spice and Beckham."

Sandy Boler, editor of Brides magazine, gave the verdict: "Posh Spice will have the glamour and the glitz. Her dress will be more important in terms of fashion."

Cruyff legend re-visited

AMSTERDAM, Apr 7: Ajax Amsterdam fans turned out in force on Tuesday to pay tribute once more to Johan Cruyff, the club's most famous son, reports Reuters.

In a display of the old skills, Cruyff was joined on the pitch in a special match by the likes of Ruud Krol, Johan Neeskens and Frank Rijkaard.

In front of a 51,000 sell-out crowd at the Amsterdam arena, Cruyff treated the fans to some true vintage football.

The crowd, everyone of them waving a number 14 Johan Cruyff flag, loved every minute of it, cheering two goals from current Ajax coach Jan Wouters and another from the famed Marco van Basten.

The teams were made up of players who turned out for Ajax in European Cup finals since 1969. The fact that Cruyff was on the losing side did not matter a jot.

A second game featuring the current Ajax team against a Barcelona side stuffed with Dutch players also had the faithful on the edge of their seats.

Shota Arveladze opened the scoring for Ajax with a thumping header in the 26th minute before goals from Mauricio Pellegrino and Sonny Anderson gave a 2-1 lead to Barcelona with whom Cruyff also had such a distinguished association.

The fans had to wait until the 90th minute before Bryan Roy levelled the score in a fitting finish to a memorable evening. capped when Cruyff and the players did a lap of honour with the crowd singing the Liverpool anthem, "you'll never walk alone."

Russians waiting in the cold



MOSCOW, Apr 7 (Reuters/Internet): Lazio must survive a wintry visit to Moscow before they can dream of their first Cup Winners' Cup final.

Lokomotiv stage Wednesday's semifinal first leg against a Rome side bidding for an historic league and Cup double at home and in Europe this season.

Lazio are not underestimating their opponents nor the Russian chill. "We do not consider Lokomotiv a weaker side than Chelsea or Mallorca but still came here to win," said Lazio coach Sven Goran Eriksson on his arrival in Moscow on Tuesday.

"My team is not distracted, we are not thinking about this weekend's derby with Roma. We cannot commit any errors now we've got this far. Only Moscow stands between us and the final." The final is in Birmingham on May 19.

Eriksson will make a few adjustments to his usual line-up, with Spaniard Ivan De La Pena replacing playmaker Roberto Mancini in midfield and veteran winger Attilio Lombardo given a breather in favour of Portugal's Sergio Conceicao.

Defender Paolo Negro should step in for Alessandro Nesta at the centre of the defence alongside Yugoslav Sinisa Mihajlovic.

Christian Vieri, partnered in attack by Chile's Marcelo Salas, returns to Moscow for the first time since scoring a vital goal in a snowstorm in a World Cup play-off between Russia and Italy in October 1997.

That match ended 1-1 and Italy went on to qualify for the finals. "I scored on my last visit to Moscow but it doesn't mean I will do it again this time," the tall striker said.

"Maybe some of my partners could get scared by the quality of the pitch in Moscow, but not me."

Vieri, whose return from injury earlier this year coincided with Lazio's rise to the top of the

Italian league, has usually been rested in Cup matches this season and is still seeking his first goal in the competition.

Lokomotiv, the least popular of the five Moscow teams, are seeking to become the first Russian side in 27 years to reach a final in a major European club competition.

Dynamo Moscow made it to the Cup Winners' Cup final in 1972, losing to Glasgow Rangers 3-2.

But despite their second straight Cup Winners' Cup semifinal appearance, Lokomotiv are regarded as underdogs against Lazio, ranked second among European teams behind Bayern Munich.

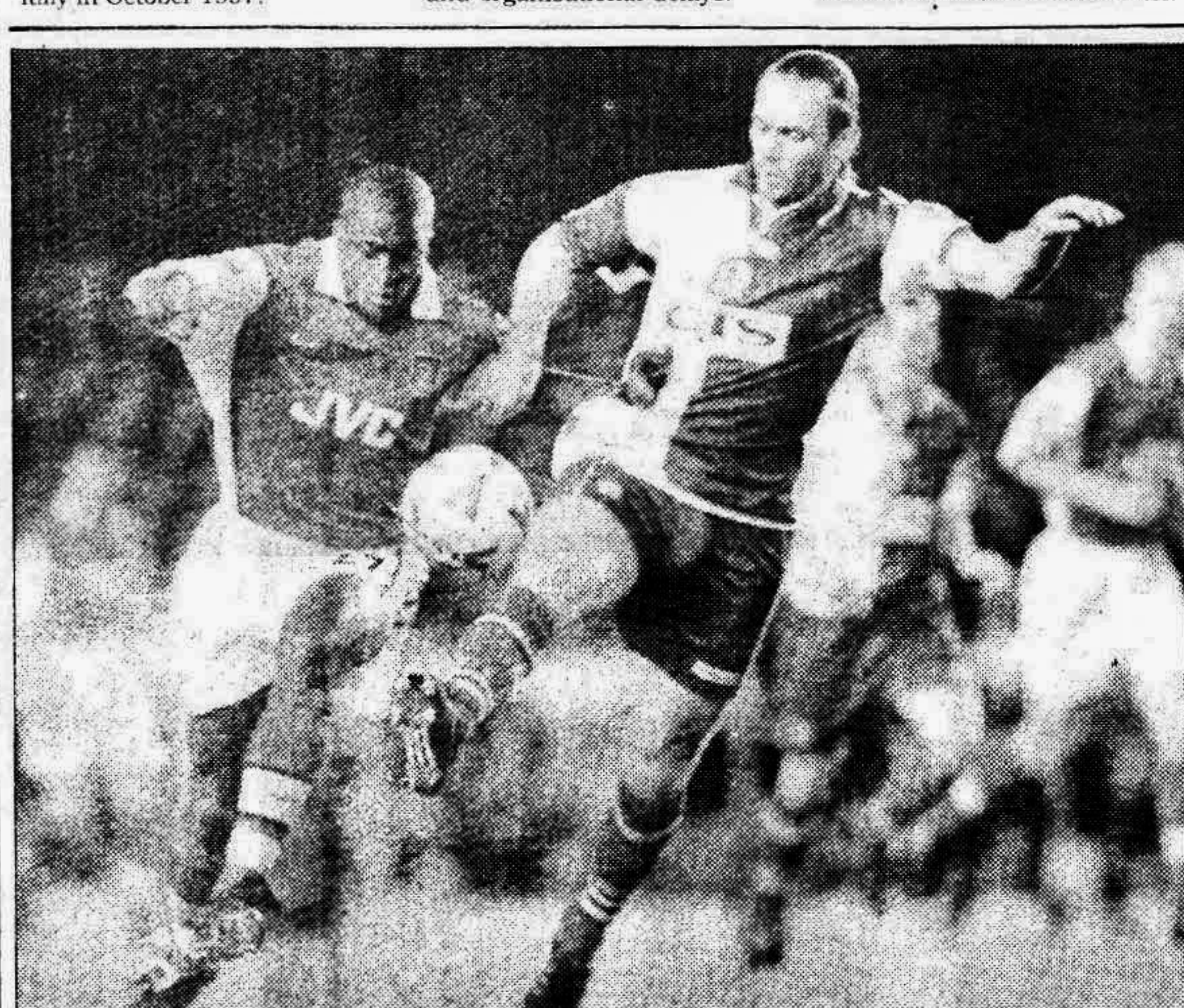
"We were drawn against one of the best sides in the world, if not the best," said their coach Yuri Yurymov. "The Italians have plenty of top class players and their two strikers Salas and Vieri are very aggressive and extremely dangerous."

The Moscow side are coming off a disappointing 1-1 draw in the Russian league opener against Rostselmash on Saturday.

LINE-UPS

Lokomotiv: Ruslan Nigmatullin; Igor Cherevchenko, Yuri Drozdov, Yevgeny Kharlachyov, Andrei Lavrik, Igor Chlugaiov, Alexei Smertin, Sergei Gurenko, Zaza Dzhanashia, Dmitry Loskov, Dmitry Bulkin.

Lazio: Luca Marchegiani; Giuseppe Favali, Paolo Negro, Sinisa Mihajlovic, Giuseppe Pancaro, Attilio Lombardo, Ivan De La Pena, Mattias Almeyda, Pavel Nedved, Marcelo Salas, Christian Vieri.



Darren Peacock (R) of Blackburn Rovers and Arsenal's Kaba Diawara battle for possession during their English Premiership fixture at Highbury on April 6. — AFP photo

Blatter happy with hosts



LAGOS, Apr 7 (Reuters/Internet): FIFA president Sepp Blatter heaped lavish praise on Nigerian organisers of the World Youth Championship on Tuesday and said his only gripe was of the small crowds at some games.

He later reiterated his belief that the World Cup could be held every two years and said his support was growing for his idea.

Blatter, who has watched five games at the World Youth championship, said that Nigeria had silenced the critics who claimed the country was not capable of organising the 24-team competition.

"My own impressions are better than the ones I have got from reading the local media," he said. "I have a good impression of the organisation and this is shared by the players, coaches, referees and most of the media."

"The facilities are meeting the basic conditions of FIFA and are even above these conditions -- the stadium, the training grounds, the transport organisation, the hotels and, above all, the hospitality given by the Nigerian people and I think this is a wonderful achievement."

"I never doubted Nigeria could do it and they proved they can do it," he added. "I believe in Africa."

Blatter brushed off a floodlight failure during Sunday's Mexico-Ireland match as something that could happen anywhere. Blatter was in the stadium when it was plunged into darkness in the second half.

"It happened at the World Youth Championship in Australia and it has happened at a

World Cup in a European country," he said.

"The important thing is how quickly you react and in Ibadan they did it very well."

But he said there was no excuse for the deserted terraces before which some matches were played.

"How did they manage to keep the people out of the stadium on the first and second match days? There's such a huge interest everywhere."

He then claimed that support

was growing for his proposal to hold a World Cup every two years.

He reiterated that he saw the idea as viable if tournaments were given as the European championship and Africans Nations' Cup were used as qualifying competitions.

"At the moment, if a player misses a World Cup, he has an eight year-gap between World Cups and by the next one, he might be too old."

There would be less games rather than more if nations adhered to his proposed worldwide calendar, which would set aside specific dates for international games.

Blatter envisaged a huge future for women's football, describing himself as converted to the cause.

"There are 40 million girls and women playing the game. By the year 2006, as many girls as boys will be playing," he said.



SEPP BLATTER

Sampras to play in Barcelona Open

BARCELONA, Spain, Apr 7: World number one Pete Sampras will play in next week's Barcelona Open after being given a wild card, organisers said today, reports Reuters.

Sampras, who recently won back top spot in the rankings from Spain's Carlos Moya, had planned to miss an event he has played in just once, going out in the second round in 1995.

The American will be up against some tough competition in a tournament which features seven of the world's top 10, including Moya, Yegor Kafelnikov and Tim Henman.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS
1 Potential
4 Corvine call
7 Handford's last boy
12 "The Greatest"
13 - tree
14 Whirling
15 Abner's adjective
16 Play receipts
18 Prefix for system
19 10 percent
20 Shea squad
22 Prior to
23 Defect
27 Citric cooler
29 Honest
31 French soldier
34 Destroyed
35 Vent
37 Scott Joplin's style
38 City on the Hudson
39 Panisian pal
41 Fedestail occupant
45 Diving apparatus
47 Bitter brew
48 Sports-

Grid for crossword puzzle with numbers 1-48.

CRYPTOQUIP
A T W M S H F B T - G S O X W V
I S B N N X A H G M T U S B F
G X N L F W X V L S O F B U X ' N
' T B X V V G F - F L L S '
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: THE SAVVY ELECTRICIAN WAS SO LIKELY TO KEEP UP WITH CURRENT EVENTS.
Today's Cryptoquip clue: V equals G
The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, 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.