

Lara, Walsh's mystery truancy

LONDON, May 12: Fears that West Indian stars Brian Lara and Courtney Walsh could miss the start of the World Cup grew on Wednesday as they mysteriously failed to appear for the team's final tune-up, reports AFP.

Questions over the state of Lara's wrist injury have been raging ever since he declared himself fully fit on arriving in England at the end of last month.

The team captain was absent for the third practice game in a row as his team-mates amassed 224 for six off 40 overs against English county side Surrey in a rain-affected encounter at The Oval.

Lara was also not selected for earlier games against Gloucestershire and Warwickshire.

The West Indies open their World Cup with a tough group B tie against Pakistan at Bristol on Sunday.

Last week Lara, questioned about the injury which has dogged him since early April, snapped: "Go and ask the doctors."

Strike bowler Walsh's absence has also raised eyebrows after he said he was fit to play against Gloucestershire at the weekend. Team officials, however, left him out, saying he had a knee problem.

Should Lara or Walsh be absent, they would leave a gaping hole in a team already seriously weakened by the late withdrawal of leading batsman Carl Hooper from the tournament.

Veteran fast bowler Curtly Ambrose, meanwhile, made the team sheet for the first time on Wednesday.

Wicket-keeper-batsman Ridley Jacobs continued his fine form with 80. Opening the innings, he put on 99 with Shivnarine Chanderpaul who made 46. Ricardo Powell, Hooper's replacement, made a stunning 53 off 22 balls inclusive of three sixes and four fours.

England paceman Alex Tudor, who made his debut in the recent Ashes series, took three for 15 off eight overs.

Surrey, however, will need to score six runs an over to win after being set a revised target of 258 to win off 40 overs.

Zamorano uneasy about captain Ronaldo

APPIANO GENTILE, Italy, May 12: Ronaldo may be a great footballer, but the Inter Milan captaincy needs to be taken away from him and given to Diego Simeone, according to teammate Ivan Zamorano, reports AFP.

"I respect Ronaldo, who is a great lad," said Zamorano. "But in my opinion, the captain of a side should be chosen by the team -- who decide to identify themselves with him -- and not by the coach or by the club."

Asked who he thought should wear the armband instead, Zamorano said: "Simeone is the one who has more characteristics of a leader."

Zamorano denied there had been an exchange of words between Ronaldo and Simeone earlier this season, saying that has not been short of locker room problems at the club.

"There is no jealousy of Ronaldo among the other South Americans," the Chilean insisted. "The supposed row between Simeone and Ronaldo never happened."

"And anyway, the important thing for players in any team is to respect each other and to fight together on the pitch," he said. "It's not as if, off the pitch, we have to go out to dinner together."

Ronaldo first got the armband on April 3 for Inter's home game with Fiorentina; skipper Giuseppe Bergomi was on the subs' bench after injury and veteran goalkeeper Gianluca Pagliuca was suspended.

The move came as a surprise, as Ronaldo is still recovering physically and psychologically from the effects of the World Cup finals and, by temperament, is a boyish mix of shyness, sensitivity and playfulness.

He is also only 22, although Inter could point to two other 22-year-old skippers this season: Lazio's Alessandro Nesta and Roma's Francesco Totti.

Spanish players want restriction on foreigners

MADRID, May 12: The Spanish footballers' union (AFE) has Tuesday suggested that Primera Liga clubs be restricted to three non-European players from the 2000/2001 season, reports AFP.

They want a maximum of three players on the field and no more than four on a club's books in the top flight and only two in division two.

No agreement has yet been reached with the Sports Ministry, the Spanish football federation (RFEF) and the Professional Football League, but a new meeting has been planned for May 28.

Last week Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar criticised the growing reliance of top Spanish clubs on foreign players, pointing out that world youth champions Spain had an abundance of homegrown young talent.

His remarks triggered a curt reply from Barcelona's Dutch coach Louis Van Gaal, who has courted controversy by his recruitment policy, notably with an eight-strong Dutch contingent.

Barca have been nicknamed Ajax Barcelona and Holland-barca by some critics although success on the field has muted some of the criticism.

Van Gaal said: "Aznar knows nothing about football, he is no coach."

Lankans prepare for cricket feast



COLOMBO, May 12: Loads of good food and gallons of beer will be on offer on Friday when cricket-crazy Sri Lanka comes to a standstill to watch their team begin its campaign to retain the World Cup, reports Reuters.

Offices are likely to close early and streets will be deserted when captain Arjuna Ranatunga steps out at the Lord's for the toss with his English counterpart Alastair Stewart.

The two have traded jibes in recent days over various issues, including the use of stump microphones, and a win in the opener against England would make Sri Lankans more than happy.

Sri Lankans take their cricket seriously and for local companies the World Cup offers a good opportunity to increase their sales at a time when the economy is slowing.

Companies are pumping millions of rupees in advertising campaigns to entice middle-class consumers into buying their products by offering free tickets to the biggest cricket show.

From televisions to car radios and even refrigerators, everything is available at a discount.

For those who can afford it, hotels in Colombo are offering special deals on the days Sri Lanka play their matches. Book a room, get free beer and watch cricket in five-star comfort.

Giant screens have suddenly sprouted across the city, in hotels, restaurants and shops, for people to watch the match while some discotheques plan to open in the afternoon.

"Fill yourself with kottu roti (a Sri Lanka dish), hamburgers, sandwiches and many more from our special menu. One-for-one offer on beer to keep your spirits high," Colombo 2000 discotheque advertised. Even free air tickets are available to the lucky ones.

Others will simply stay home.

"I am going to have an open house. Drop in if you feel like. There will be others," said a businessman, who would probably spend the next one month lolling in front of his television.

That obviously creates problems for business in the country.

"Productivity suffers World Cup cramp," screamed a headline in the Sunday Times newspaper.

"There would be more work

in offices -- calculating statistics and figures of Sri Lankan performances -- and less of anything else," it said.

Sri Lanka has the highest number of holidays in the world, the newspaper said, adding that public sector employees enjoy 172 official holidays in the year. They also get 40 days of annual leave, which most of them take.

The only advantage for employers probably is that the matches don't start until 3:00 pm which means some work might get done in the mornings.



Sri Lankan master-bat Aravinda de Silva square cuts during a practice match against Leicestershire at Grace Road on May 11. — AFP photo

Russians love Beckham

MOSCOW, May 12: The UEFA Cup must be the last thing on David Beckham's mind as the England star prepares for a Champions Cup final showdown with Bayern Munich, the FA Cup final against Newcastle and the small matter of winning the Premiership with Manchester United, reports AFP.

But Beckham, if he did not know it, is big in Moscow, where a straw poll of Russian fans revealed he is their favourite player.

Young fans hoping to catch a glimpse of Parma and Marseille in the semi-finals to the UEFA Cup final here said Beckham was their number one - followed by Newcastle tough Georgian midfielder Temuri Ketsbaia, is formerly of Dynamo Tbilisi.

Regarding clubs, Manchester United were marginally less popular than Moscow outfits Spartak and CSKA.

Maradona loses appeal

BUENOS AIRES, May 12: An Argentine court on Tuesday rejected an appeal against a suspended jail sentence for soccer star Diego Maradona, who was convicted last year of shooting at reporters with an air rifle in 1994, reports Reuters.

Maradona's lawyer launched an immediate appeal against the conviction, of two years and 10 months, when it was made last June.

"The journalists that I represent were looking of the legal system to show that nobody is privileged and that we are all equal before the law," said Marcelo Bermolen, the lawyer representing the journalists that were shot at.

Footage of the shooting incident showed Maradona crouched behind a car with two other men firing an air gun at reporters besieging his home. Prosecutors and the journalists' lawyers had sought for Maradona to serve a prison sentence. While his sentence is a suspended one, he has to be on good conduct.

Roh AFC player for April

KUALA LUMPUR, May 12: Roh Sang Rae of South Korea's Chunnam Dragons has been named Asian-footballer-of-the-month for April, reports AFP.

Though his side lost the Asian Cup Winners' Cup final to Al-Ittihad of Saudi Arabia, Roh was hailed as the outstanding player of the final tournament, the Asian Football Confederation said.

The South Korean World Cup, player scored twice in the semi-finals as Chunnam destroyed Japan's Kashima Antlers 4-1, to qualify for their first Asian final.

Japanese soccer scooped two of April's awards.

Coach of the Month was Koichi Iwata's Takashi Kuwabara, the first man to lead a J-League side to the Asian Club Champions crown when they won the title in Tehran against Esteghal.

The 50-year-old took Jubilo to their first J-League title in 1997 when, as caretaker coach, he guided the team to victory over Kashima Antlers in the championship play-off.

Jubilo's win in the Asian Club Championship capped a remarkable month for Japan. The nation's under 20 team were runners-up in the World Youth Championship in Nigeria, behind Spain, and achievement that earned them the Team of the Month award.

Graf's 1000th match

BERLIN, May 12: German legend Steffi Graf, playing the 1000th singles match of her career, almost spoiled the celebrations to mark the occasion when she struggled to overcome Yugoslav qualifier Sandra Nacuk in the second round of the German Open, reports AFP.

Third seeded Graf eventually survived 2-6, 6-3, 6-4, but there were first round defeats for ninth seeded Russian Anna Kournikova, who lost a marathon battle with American Mary Joe Fernandez 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 7-6 (8/6), and 10th seed Amanda Coetzer of South Africa, who fell 6-4, 6-1 to Slovakia's Henrieta Nagyova.

However, there was victory for 12th seeded Anelise Mauro of France, who began her first week in the world's top 10 with a 6-4, 6-3 win over Swiss qualifier Emmanuelle Gagliardi.

Defeat for Graf by 18-year-old Nacuk, from Monica Seles' home town of Novi Sad, would have marked arguably the lowest point in her distinguished career, following what was already the worst loss she has suffered, in her last match on the same court two years ago.

It was then, in the quarterfinals, that she fell 6-0, 6-1 to Coetzer.

Graf failed to hold serve at all in the first set, losing the first game with four forehand errors and a double backhand. And it didn't get much better. Struggling to find any touch or rhythm and with her famed forehand all over the place, Graf went down 3-0 when Nacuk cleverly pulled her wide to force a netted backhand.

In the second set, Graf became more aggressive and reduced point unforced errors, to at least compete on level terms. With Graf leading 2-1, 30-30, rain forced the players off court, and when they returned a single break of serve for 4-2, on the second of only two break points, earned Graf the set.

With the Yugoslav leading 1-0, Graf had to hold her off by winning a 30-shot rally and then a double backhand reach a dropshot to prevent Nacuk breaking for 2-0.

Indians gear up for the fiesta



NEW DELHI, May 12 (AFP): "Cricket-crazy India is set to be bowled over by the World Cup beginning this week, with television viewers expected to touch 80 million and hundreds of thousands shirking work to catch the action."

Easily the king of sports here, cricket has captured the imagination of Indians since its introduction in the last century by British colonial rulers, whose other favourite pastimes were polo, tennis and game hunting.

Test cricketers in India enjoy demigod status that is rarely accorded to other national sportsmen.

Former captain Sunil Gavaskar became the first Indian sportsman to become a millionaire, while current batting star Sachin Tendulkar has made a fortune in endorsements.

Recently Indian fans in Britain put up a banner screaming: "Cricket is our religion, Sachin is our god."

According to social commentator T.R. Gopalakrishnan, Tendulkar has become a key cult figure in Indian life.

"Every nation needs heroes and icons whom people can cleave to in times of distress and difficulty. At the moment the icon is the diminutive and unassuming Sachin Tendulkar, whose bat has done more to boost the morale of this country

than anything else," Gopalakrishnan said.

Sociologist Ashish Nandi, whose best-selling book "The Tao of Cricket" seeks to fathom the national obsession with cricket, compared the game to Hindu philosophy.

"There is something in the rhythm of cricket that is compatible with the Hindu rhythm of life. Nothing very dramatic happens in cricket and the game allows the players' character to unfold."

"It is like playing dice with one's own fate -- a very Hindu concept. In other games, things like weather affect both sides equally. In the glorious uncertainties of cricket, they can make or break a match."

Nandi also suggested why cricket was popular in more laidback regions such as South Asia instead of fast-moving cultures like the United States.

"It has been made more adjustable to contemporary times and the game has been compressed from a five-day test to one-dayers. But even these take eight to nine hours. In a pop culture like America nobody will give so much time, but here time is not a consideration."

The game, traditionally equated with fair play and gentlemen, has also served as a great leveller in India's hierarchical society.

Originally cricket was considered the exclusive pastime of Indian royalty. Stars in the past have included Maharaja Ranjitsinghi, who enjoys a status comparable

to W.G. Grace, and the erstwhile ruler of the princely state of Patnauli who played for Britain in the notorious "bodyline" series against Australia in the 1930s.

Nowadays, cricket is played everywhere in India, from the lowliest slums and poorest villages to the poshest public schools and clubs.

Tendulkar comes from a very ordinary middle class family as do several others in the current Indian team.

Manishi Roy, spokeswoman of India's largest trade forum, the Confederation of Indian Industry, admitted that the cricket fever would result in thousands of workers playing hooky to catch live telecasts from Britain.

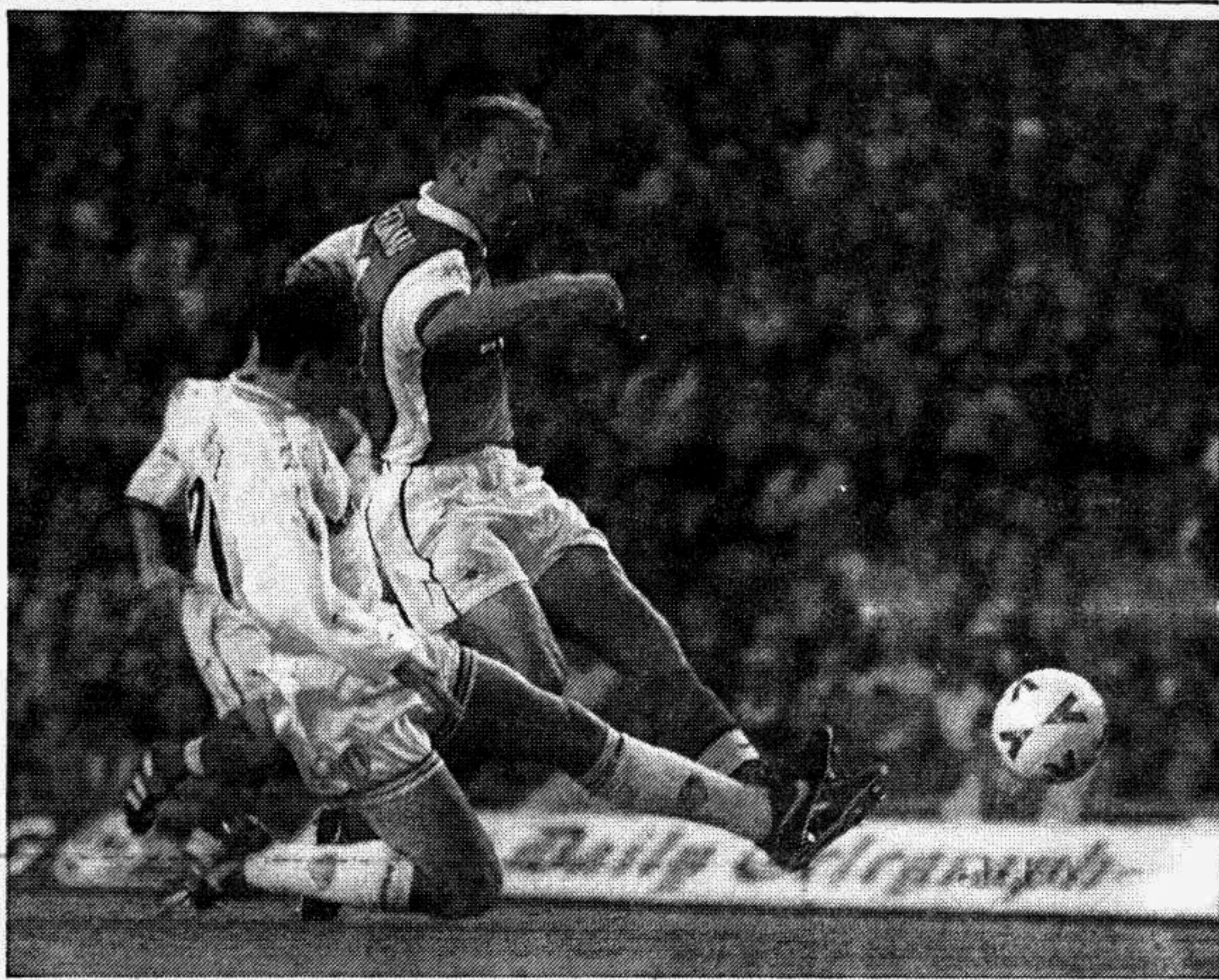
"But the pros outweigh the cons," she said.

"Business will be more in every way from Coca Cola to televisions and any cricket-related paraphernalia. Despite people staying away from work, the overall impact on business will be positive."

Army b'ball

RANGPUR, May 12: Hosts Rangpur and Jessore Area moved into the final of the Bangladesh Army Basketball Championship at Rangpur Cantonment today, reports UNB.

The Rangpur Area defeated Air Defence Artillery by 58-50 while the Jessore Area beat Comilla Area by 72-68 in two semifinal matches.



Dutch superstar Dennis Bergkamp (R) shooting past the outstretched leg of Leeds United's Ian Harte during their English Premiership encounter at Elland Road on May 11. Arsenal lost 0-1. — AFP photo

Leeds open door for MU



LEEDS, May 12: Arsenal suffered a shock 1-0 defeat at Leeds United on Tuesday and their manager Arsene Wenger believes his team's chance of retaining the English Premier League title will be over if leaders Manchester United earn a draw at Blackburn Rovers today, reports Reuters.

Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink headed home the winner from a Harry Kewell far post cross in the 86th minute to seal a stormy Elland Road clash.

The result left Manchester United in prime position. They are level on points with Arsenal with a one goal advantage but still have two games to play compared to the London side's one.

"It's not over until tomorrow night but I would say it's not in our hands. That's why we regret conceding the goal otherwise it wouldn't be too bad," Wenger said.

Wenger is now hoping relegation-threatened Blackburn will upset United at Ewood Park because he has little faith in Tottenham winning the final game at Old Trafford on Sunday.

"I don't expect Manchester United to lose it because a point will be good enough for them and they will not lose their fi-

nal game at home," he added.

Arsenal complete their season at home to Aston Villa on Sunday.

Wenger was frustrated by the way Arsenal conceded the winner and blamed poor marking by Nelson Vivas.

Leeds manager David O'Leary, a former Arsenal player, said he had no sympathy for his old club.

"Nobody gives me sympathy. You win the championship by doing it off your own back and getting little bits of luck on the way. I think the title is in United's hands now," he said.

Arsenal survived several scares in a first half that culminated in Ian Harte hitting the bar from a 45th minute penalty.

Arsenal defender Tony Adams was also lucky not to concede another penalty with a reckless 55th minute challenge on Alan Smith in the box as the game threatened to boil over.

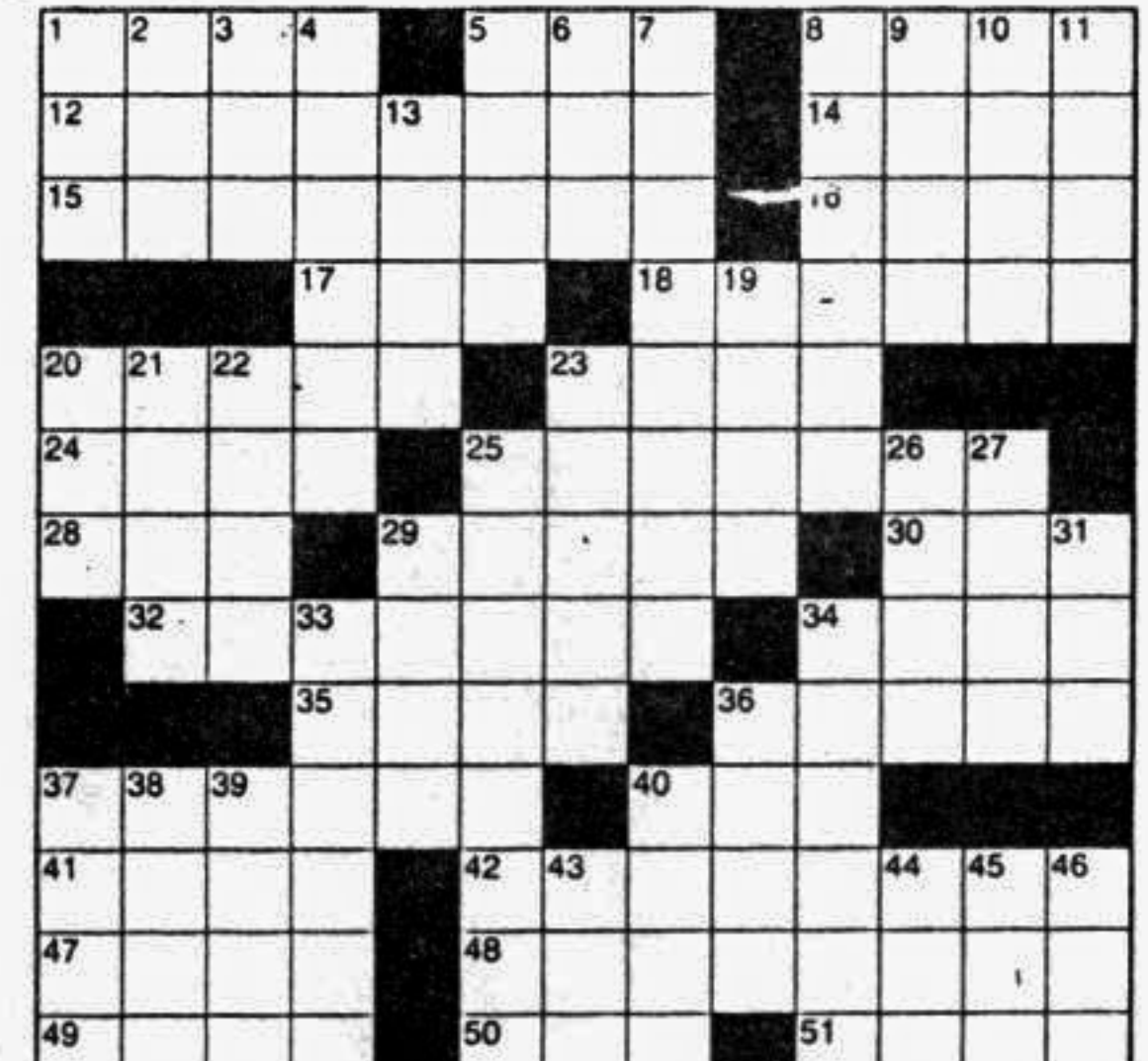
But the Gunners had chances, with substitute Kaba Diawara denied three times after coming on in the 70th minute. In the final quarter of the game he had a shot headed off the line by Jonathan Woodgate, saw Nigel Martin make a sprawling save from close range and fired in a header that clipped the bar.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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6 Chase of Hollywood
12 Great happiness
14 High time
15 Universe
16 Power
17 Actress
18 Activities
20 Foundation
23 Nest piece
24 Eye part
25 "U.S.A.", e.g.
28 Eight pts.
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40 Humor
41 Like a bump on
42 Personal magnetism

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8 Rainbow member
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10 Inn
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Solution time: 25 min.



CRYPTOQUIP

CPTG QWJ GTGK AWJFM
NCPN OPNGKRGYWF APRKGD
OGKG WANGF KGPY DGGMQ?
Saturday's Cryptogram: I SUPPOSE THE GOSSIPY WHALER WAS SIMPLY A BIG BLUBBERMOUTH.
Today's Cryptogram clue: A equals F
The Cryptogram 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.