

Hammers deny Ince move

LONDON, July 9: West Ham said Wednesday they are not interested in bringing former favourite Paul Ince back to Upton Park even though the England midfielder is likely to be sold by Liverpool, reports AFP.

The Hammers were linked with a 1.6 million dollar move for Ince - who left a decade ago for Manchester United under a storm of controversy - after manager Harry Redknapp was quoted expressing his admiration for the player.

Redknapp, who confirmed the London outfit would not be making a bid, also revealed that the proposed move of Cameroon international midfielder Marc-Vivien Foe to Liverpool.

Rush turns down coaching offer

LONDON, July 9: Ian Rush, star of Liverpool's domination of English football in the 80's, has left English second division club Wrexham despite being offered a coaching role, reports AFP.

Manager Brian Flynn said he had offered the 37-year-old a year's contract but was told by the former Welsh international striker he had a number of other options.

With the job of Wales manager currently vacant, the Anfield legend could be about to make a bid to take over the national post.

Giovanni joins Olympiakos

ATHENS, July 9: Greek champions Olympiakos have signed Barcelona's Brazilian World Cup midfielder Giovanni on a three-year contract worth around 6.3 million dollars, reports Reuters.

The deal is done after marathon negotiations with Barcelona. We expect him to arrive in Athens next week, an Olympiakos official said today.

Giovanni was among nine players told by Barcelona coach Luis van Gaal last month that they were no longer part of his plans.

He joined the Spanish champions from Santos in the 1996 close season but spent much of this season on the bench after falling out with van Gaal.

Johansson apprehensive

LOS ANGELES, July 9: UEFA president Lennart Johansson said Wednesday that Europe may no longer be prepared to take part in the new world team cup competition if it lasts any longer than one season, reports Reuters.

Johansson said the governing body of European football had reluctantly agreed to take part in the new FIFA competition, being staged in Brazil in January, on a one-off basis but could not guarantee the participation of a European club in any subsequent tournament.

As the dispute continued into the controversial decision by English champions Manchester United to forfeit playing in the English FA Cup in order to compete in the eight team tournament in Brazil, Johansson said: "We have to listen to our clubs."

"For this once, we are going to Brazil out of loyalty to the football family but we cannot guarantee participation in the future."

Johansson, in Los Angeles for a week-long series of FIFA meetings, said he sympathised with the position of Manchester United but denied that UEFA had already lined up Champions Cup runners-up Bayern Munich instead of United because it would have furthered the claims of Germany to be awarded the 2006 World Cup.

UEFA is officially backing Germany over England for the World Cup bid although the European vote is likely to be split come next year.

"I am extremely disappointed that United are not taking part in the FA Cup," Johansson said. "We in UEFA were afraid something like this would happen because of the overcrowded calendar. But we did not favour Bayern."

"I don't believe that the participation of either team would have had an effect on the World Cup vote. What I do think is that we cannot, in future, force our clubs to take part, just as we oppose the idea of a World Cup every two years."

PARIS, July 9: Three-time Olympic champion Marie-Jose Percec, recovering from injuries that have kept her out of top competition for two seasons, announced on Friday that she will make her comeback in Casablanca next week, reports AP.

The French sprinter, 31, will run the 400 metres at a track meet on July 15, she told a news conference, adding that after that race, she will decide on her program for the rest of the track season.

Percec, 200-metre and 400-metre Olympic champion in 1996 and 400-metre gold medalist in 1992, has had terrible luck since the 1997 World Championships in Athens, where she injured a hamstring while preparing for the 200-metre semifinal race.

She had to pull out of the European Championships in Budapest last year. Soon after, she was diagnosed with mononucleosis and has not run competitively since.

"There were times when I wanted to stop. But I couldn't bear to do it," Percec said.

Pérec poised for comeback

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Awaiting a fitting finale



LOS ANGELES, July 9: It's a blockbuster finish to the surprise hit of the year: the Women's World Cup final between the United States and China on Saturday couldn't have been scripted better by Hollywood, reports AFP.

The Chinese, who dismantled reigning champions Norway 5-0 in the semi-finals, now have a chance to avenge past defeats in a rivalry that stretches back to the inaugural Women's World Cup in 1991.

The United States captured the championship with hosts China on the sidelines after a quarter-final defeat so humiliating that the women's national team programme was virtually abandoned for two years.

The United States beat China for the gold medal at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, and rubbed it in with a victory over the Chinese for the Goodwill Games football gold last year.

Now the US team, whose explosive scoring and savvy ad-

vertising have made them stars on the summer sports stage, have a chance to do it again -- in front of President Bill Clinton and more than 85,000 spectators at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

The final will start at 12:50 p.m. (19:50 GMT) after the third-place play off between Brazil and Norway.

Fans at the stadium that staged the 1994 World Cup final will this time get a long-awaited chance to cheer the host team, but the US women aren't expecting it to be easy.

"They're playing the best soccer in their history," US coach Tony DiCicco said of the Chinese. "They are technical, athletic, they have no weaknesses. Every player is a contributor."

Most dangerous is Chinese striker Sun Wen, whose seven goals put her at the top of the tournament scoring list alongside Brazil's Sissi.

"Sun Wen has a lot of touches on the ball, but it always seems she has the right touch," said US striker Mia Hamm. "You don't see her for a while, then all of a sudden a cross is made,

and she scores."

China, a team once known as plodding and unimaginative, have developed a game based on speed and technical precision, much like the US team's style.

Sun, always a danger in the penalty area, is equally adept at creating plays from midfield.

The Chinese have scored 19 goals, but -- perhaps more problematical for the United States -- they have conceded only two in the tournament.

"Their defense is so strong," said Norway manager Per-Mathias Hogmo, whose team were held without a shot on the goal of Gao Hong in the first 63 minutes of their semi-final defeat.

While the US has the psychological edge in terms of major tournament success, China won two of the three pre-Cup friendlies the teams played this year.

"I don't think we're scared, but certainly there are lot of concerns," said DiCicco. "I don't know if we have an edge over them, and I don't know if they have an edge over us."

"I think we are the two best teams in the world right now."



US superstar Mia Hamm signing autograph on the shirt of a fan at Claremont on July 8. — AFP photo

Sun shines brightest



LOS ANGELES, July 9 (AFP): Sun Wen, the Women's World Cup crown in her sights, isn't about to be distracted by the relatively minor matter of claiming the tournament's top-scoring honours.

"I haven't really thought about that at all," said Sun, whose seven goals for China put her level at the top of the scorer's list with Brazil's Sissi.

While Sun and China take on the United States for the trophy on Saturday, Sissi and Brazil will battle Norway for third place.

"It's a position Sun remembers from China's 1995 Women's World Cup campaign, and she's glad not to be repeating it."

"My whole concentration has been on playing with the team and winning the championship," Sun said.

Sun had two goals, including a penalty, in China's 5-0 semifinal rout of Norway.

Sun, also a veteran of the host Chinese team that lost in the quarter-finals of the first Women's World Cup in 1991, started the third edition nursing a sore ankle.

But the 26-year-old, five-foot-four-inch forward has shown no sign of weakness.

"She has speed, she has power... she has great vision all over the field," said Norwegian

midfielder Hege Riise, who was voted the player of the tournament in 1995.

Sun's versatility, as much as the number of goals she has scored, has put her in the running for that title this year.

She has scored on a header as well as with each foot. Against Norway she took a direct kick from the left side and fired straight to teammate Fan Yunjie in front of the Norwegian goal. Fan had only to let the ball bounce off her body for a goal.

"She is creative," said Chinese coach Ma Yuanan. "She can do moves that are hard to imagine."

Sun's interest in football came from her father, who took her to watch Chinese men's league matches. But she said that, for a girl, playing was another matter.

"The game of football is not very popular for women," she said. "The activity for most girls is dancing and playing the piano."

"I was like a little boy," she added. "I liked to play with boys and I played a lot of sports."

A more grown up Sun also studied literature at the University of Shanghai, and in her football career she is one of only three women to appear in all 15 matches played by China in its three World Cup appearances.

Unlike some of her teammates, she doesn't hesitate to show her emotions on the pitch, pumping her fist in celebration of a goal or grimacing in disgust at a thwarted play.

"I believe this is the climax of my career in soccer," Sun said by way of explanation of her exuberance.



SUN WEN

Too big a gamble

LONDON, July 9 (Reuters): Asian soccer faces a return to the dark days of the 1960s as its officials call for a boycott of the qualifying competition of the 2002 World Cup finals.

In the mid-1960s, every Asian nation apart from North Korea boycotted the qualifiers in a row over the allocation of places for the 1966 finals in England.

More than three decades later, the same principle is at the heart of the current crisis -- the number of places allocated to one of the world's most populous regions but one of the weakest in terms of achievement on the field.

Although the finals are being staged in Asia for the first time in 2002 by joint-hosts South Korea and Japan, the 45-nation strong Asian Football Confederation have long been unhappy about their allocation.

They are insisting to world governing body FIFA that they will be under-represented with only four Asian nations competing in the finals -- South Korea and Japan plus two qualifiers.

Asia's argument is that it had four qualifiers -- Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Iran and Japan -- at last year's World Cup finals in France and is effectively being penalised for hosting the finals by being reduced to just two qualifiers for 2002.

They want parity at least with 1998 -- when they had three automatic qualifiers with Iran coming through as the fourth after winning a play-off against Australia.

On Tuesday it appeared a compromise had been reached in meetings ahead of today's FIFA Congress in Los Angeles when UEFA said it would give up one of its automatic qualifying berths and instead volunteered a play-off between a European country and an Asian nation.

In soccer's political parlance, that is known as a half-place, and earlier this week it seemed Asian officials might settle for that. But Thursday's emergency meeting of Asian delegates in Los Angeles proved just the opposite.

Asia's argument is that because the finals are in Asia and because they have improved sufficiently they should have more places.

But the record of Asian teams in World Cup finals from 1978 onwards makes depressing reading.

Of 37 matches played Asian teams have won just three matches, drawn seven times and lost 27. Their only wins came when Saudi Arabia beat Belgium and Morocco in 1994 and Iran beat the United States in 1998.

Today's argument is a throw-back to one of the stormier episodes in World Cup history when FIFA allocated just one place in the 1966 finals in England to cover both the Asian and African continents.

As a result all the African countries withdrew from the qualifying competition and all but North Korea withdrew from the Asian qualifying competition.

North Korea eventually beat Australia twice to qualify for the finals where they later created a sensation by beating Italy and reaching the quarter-finals.

That proved a false dawn for both North Korean and Asian soccer and it took the continent many years to make any mark at all on the finals again.

North Korea have never appeared in the finals since, while South Korea have qualified for each of the last four tournaments but have yet to win a match.

More than 30 years after their moment in the sun, North Korea remain the only nation to have reached the last eight in the World Cup.

Hosting the World Cup in Asia has posed many new problems for FIFA -- not all of them yet resolved. Even the proposed dates of the finals are problematic as the finals must avoid the region's rainy season -- but not clash with the end of the European playing season.

There is no suggestion as yet that if the boycott goes ahead the finals would be moved. But FIFA might only be pushed so far.



EVEN SUPERSTARS NEED TO SHOP: Brazil captain Cafu (L) being sprayed some perfume for testing by a shop attendant while Ronaldo (R) tries out a watch in Ciudad del Este on July 7. — AFP photo

Italians brace for soccer feast on TV

MILAN, July 9: Italians are due a soccer extravaganza next season after the Football League unveiled plans for seven-days-a-week TV coverage, reports AFP.

Though traditionally played on Sundays, the Serie A will now be split every weekend between Saturday (at least two matches) and Sunday, where the kick-off time will now be fixed at 3.00pm, ending the seasonal variations.

Mondays and Fridays will each see a Serie B match, with the enlarged Champions League being hosted on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and the revamped UEFA Cup on Thursdays.

Spare slots during the week, when European action takes a rest between rounds, will meanwhile be filled up with Italian Cup ties.

League boss Franco Carraro denied there was a risk of an overdose of the beautiful game and argued that the fixed Sunday kick-off time would improve family life in Italy.

The important thing is to always offer top quality matches which will entertain sports fans and motivate young people," he said.

As for improving life in the average Italian household, Carraro added: "With the different kick-off times, it's always been difficult for families to organise Sundays so that everybody is happy."

"Starting at 3.00pm all season is something which will be good for football and for family life."

Aside from improving the lot of Italy's mums and dads, the changes are principally designed to exploit the rapidly emerging market for subscription and pay-per-view television here.

The League also approved a FIFA-backed experiment to use two referees in the same match for the latter stages of the Italian Cup.

Each ref will be responsible for one half of the pitch as opposed to the original proposals which had both refs free to wander where they liked.

FA to conduct more drug tests

READING, England, July 9: The Football Association said Thursday they are to double the number of random drug tests next season after two young English players tested positive for Class A drugs, reports AFP.

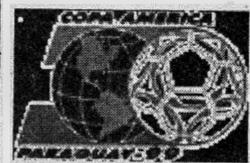
Second Division side Reading have sacked their 20-year-old first team midfielder Byron Glasgow after he tested positive for cocaine and cannabis.

Glasgow was one of two players who failed drugs tests last season -- the other was recorded by a 17-year-old Premiership youth trainee who tested positive for class A substance morphine and subsequently admitted to suffering from a serious heroin addiction.

The drugs tests were announced by the Football Association as the results of their season-long testing campaign, in which 544 random tests were carried out.

As a result of the findings announced by the FA's head of medicine Alan Hodson, Reading sacked Glasgow. He tested positive for cannabis and cocaine when sampling officers carried out a random training ground test and has subsequently been charged with misconduct.

Roque ready to rock and roll



ASUNCION, July 9: The world's most expensive teenager Roque Santa Cruz has vowed to be Copa America top scorer as he spearheads host nation Paraguay in their quarter-final clash with Uruguay on Saturday, reports AFP.

Santa Cruz, who left Olimpia Asuncion for German champions Bayern Munich in May, is currently the tournament's joint top scorer alongside Brazilian pair Ronaldo and Amoroso as well as Argentina's Martin Palermo.

The 17-year-old has certainly shouldered the twin burdens of home expectancy and a world record price tag with distinction so far.

Two goals in the 4-0 rout of Japan were followed by the late winner against Peru that ensured Paraguay -- hosting the event for the first time -- topped group A.

But the young gun, already learning German before departing for Europe when the Copa is over, is not finished yet. He told AFP he wanted to finish top scorer before adding: "This would please me if it was added to the (Copa America) title."

Despite his tender years Santa Cruz has refused to get carried away with his good showing so far. He said: "Now it is the difficult part because we must win every match."

Santa Cruz, as well as gifted feet, has replaced veteran goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert as the focal point of the Paraguay



ROQUE SANTA CRUZ

team.

Chilavert chose to give the Copa a miss after falling out with the country's football chiefs.

But Santa Cruz is not the only Paraguay star to catch the eye so far. Defender Carlos Gamarra, like Chilavert a star of the World Cup in France last year, has again caught the eye with his defensive capabilities and skilful distribution. Paraguay are yet to concede a goal.

Striker Miguel Benitez, a last-minute inclusion in the squad, after settling a dispute with the Paraguayan Football Federation scored the other two goals against Japan.

But Paraguay have had injury problems with Celso Ayala and also have had to cope with a bug that has affected several of their players.

Certainly Uruguay, on the evidence so far, is a relatively easy draw. The Celeste (Sky Blues) only finished third in group C, losing twice (1-0 to Colombia and 2-0 to Argentina) with a 2-1 win over Ecuador seeing them limp through to the last eight.

But cynics might point out that they did not have much incentive to win the game with Argentina as the reward for second place in the group would be a last eight clash with reigning champions and favourites Brazil.

And Paraguay are well aware they lost a Copa warm-up game to Uruguay.

In Saturday's other quarter-final Peru tackled Mexico.

Mexico are deprived of the services of one of their top players Cuauhtemoc Blanco, dismissed during his side's 3-1 win over Venezuela.

Competing as guests -- they are part of the Central American football federation -- Mexico have played some good football and came perilously close to snatching a draw with Brazil.

Peru, meanwhile, qualified in second place to Paraguay in what was clearly the easiest group. Bolivia and Japan made up the numbers.

However, Roberto Palacios has proved an impressive playmaker and they will be no pushovers for the Mexicans.

Boost for Sino-US ties



LOS ANGELES, July 9 (AFP): Professor Lin Tung-Po can't work up much enthusiasm for American sports, even after 30 years in the United States.

But the retired mathematics professor has found a sport, and a team, to root for in China's Women's World Cup squad, who take on the United States in the final on Saturday.

"I've not been watching sports all these years," Lin said. "Whenever I tune in it's either football or baseball. To me, American football is a test of endurance and strength and too rough. Baseball is too slow."

"Soccer depends a lot on foot skills, so it's very nice to watch," he said. "Especially women's soccer, it is not endurance or strength, but more skill."

Women's football, as played over the past three weeks in the third Women's World Cup, has been a revelation to many sports fans here.

But for Chinese supporters, their team has provided a focus of ethnic pride as well as a welcome counterbalance to what is seen as overly negative portrayals of China in the US media.

"I've noticed that the media often only play the negative side of China," Lin said of coverage of alleged human rights abuses in China and reports of Chinese espionage.

"It almost seems to me like a conspiracy. I don't care whether it's true or not. Quite often it probably is true, but there are also other true stories about the positive side."

An unusually frosty period in Sino-American relations provides a dramatic backdrop to the contest, but don't expect any quiet efforts to patch things up between throw-ins and corner-kicks.

US legislators, meanwhile, remain deeply alarmed by a Congressional report authored chiefly by Republican Representative Christopher Cox alleging that Beijing has pilfered a wealth of US nuclear weapons secrets.

Cox will be back in his southern California district this weekend but has no plans to join US President Bill Clinton at the game, spokesman Paul Wilkinson said.

Nor will the Chinese ambassador or any of his top deputies be in attendance, though some lower-level officials are planning to attend, embassy spokesman Yu Shuning said.

"No notables that I am aware of, but there are fans in the embassy and we will send some people to cheer them on," Yu said. "We are very excited about the performance of the Chinese girls."

Asked whether politics might press the Chinese women harder toward defeating the United States, he demurred. "In sports, people always want to win," he said.

Yu noted, however, that the Chinese coach has complained about his team's grueling travel schedule, which includes four flights across the United States compared with only one for the Americans.

"Who arranged this?" he asked daskly. "I have read that the Russians and the Norwegians were not comfortable with these long journeys either."

At the other end of the country, the Chinese have been greeted with vociferous support.

They beat Russia 2-0 in the quarter-finals in San Jose, California, outside San Francisco, where Chinese fans punctuated the goals with cheers, chants and clashing cymbals.

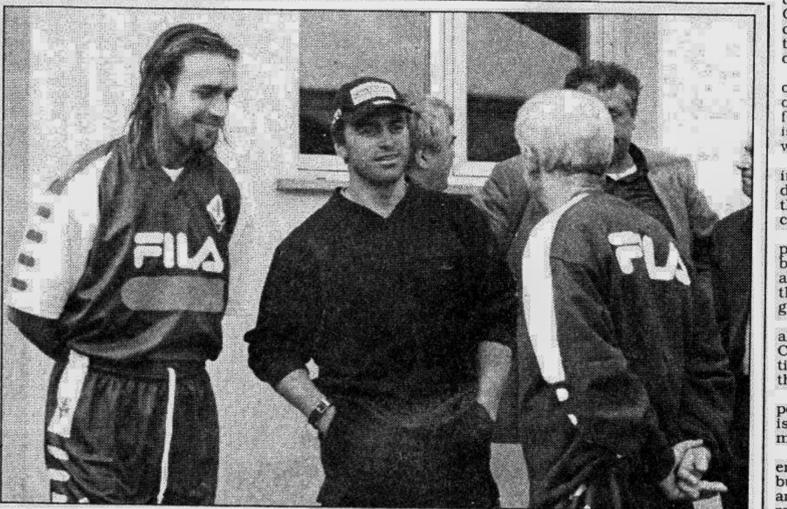
A cheering section decked out in red shirts cheered them on in Foxboro Stadium, not far from Boston, as they demolished reigning champions Norway in the semi-finals.

The post-match celebrations included a costume dragon dancing in the parking lot as a through in front of the team bus clamored for autographs.

A similar scene can be expected at the Rose Bowl, where a block of 2,000 tickets was made available to Chinese fans through local community organizations.

A post-match banquet was also being organized, with local Chinese comparing the festivities to those that accompanied the 1984 Olympics here.

Chinese language newspapers have been in high gear satisfying the demand for information.



Fiorentina's striker-supreme Gabriel Batistuta (L) and coach Giovanni Trapattoni (R) talking with Italian Alpine skier Cristian Ghedina during the opening practice session of the team at Bormio on July 8. — AFP photo