

Absent stars defended

MELBOURNE, July 14: Manchester United officials today defended the decision not to include midfielder David Beckham in their squad for the two-match tour of Australia, reports Reuters.

Beckham, who married "Posh Spice" Victoria Adams earlier this month, was among five leading players missing when the United squad arrived in Melbourne today for two pre-season matches against the Australian national team.

Others absent were Roy Keane, Paul Scholes, Gary Neville and Henning Berg and also manager Alex Ferguson.

The Australian promoters have dropped their threat to withhold half of Manchester United's 4 million Australian dollars (\$US 2.6) fee if Beckham and Ferguson failed to appear.

United's assistant manager Steve McClaren said Beckham had a slight hamstring injury and had been advised against travelling, while Keane and Neville were preparing for the start of the forthcoming English season. Scholes was awaiting the birth of his first child.

"All five players would rather be here than in the treatment room," McClaren told reporters at a media conference today.

"It isn't a case of not wanting to come, or us not wanting to bring them... at the end of the day, what we have here is the Manchester United team and no one player is bigger than the team."

McClaren said the United players were looking at the matches as part of their buildup to the new home season.

"Anyone who plays against Manchester United will not be holding back and we're expecting two very tough games," he said.

United chief executive Martin Edwards also backed the club's decision not to defend their FA Cup title this year and instead represent England in the inaugural World Club Championship in Brazil in January.

"We didn't want to come out of the FA Cup really, but once it was put to us that it would help England's bid to host the 2006 World Cup if we did go to play in Brazil, and the government was requesting it and the FA, we said we'd need to consider that."

"Obviously we're disappointed, we're the holders of the FA Cup and it was a big wrench not to go in it, but something had to give."

Edwards also denied speculation he was ready to sell his 14 per cent stake in the club to new investors.

"People get carried away with that," he said. "I've had approaches but I've made no decisions whatsoever."

United will play Australia in Melbourne on Thursday before a second meeting at Sydney's Olympic Stadium on Sunday.

Zidane looks forward

MILAN, July 14: Juventus ace Zinedine Zidane wants to put a miserable season behind him and re-discover his winning touch as the Italian football season gets underway next month, reports AFP.

Zidane won the World Cup final for France last year, but was a shadow of himself the following season in the Serie A while failing once again in his ambition to lift the European Cup.

The erratic playmaker, now training at a team hide-away at Chateau in the Italian Alps, said: "What I'm interested in is cancelling out the memory of last season. It wasn't one I liked."

Insisting that he is staying with Juventus, he also backedtracked on recent comments that he'd like one day to play in Spain, his wife being of Spanish origin.

"I was a mistake to admit it," he said. "It would have been better to have kept quiet about it. You learn something every day... perhaps there are people who want to send me away, but as long as the club want me, I'm not moving."

Last season also ended with a knee injury and surgery for the Frenchman, who hasn't fully recovered.

"It still needs time, a couple of weeks for it to be fully back to normal," he said.

Juventus, meanwhile, need to recover from a dismal league season which left them with this summer's Intertoto tournament as their only chance of reaching the UEFA Cup.

"I'm encouraged by what I've seen so far," he said. "It's going to be tough to win the league - AC Milan, Lazio, Fiorentina, Parma and Inter have all strengthened their teams. But we are at their level."

"The important thing will be to not make the same mistakes again. But I reckon that a kick in the head every so often does you good. It brings you down to earth."

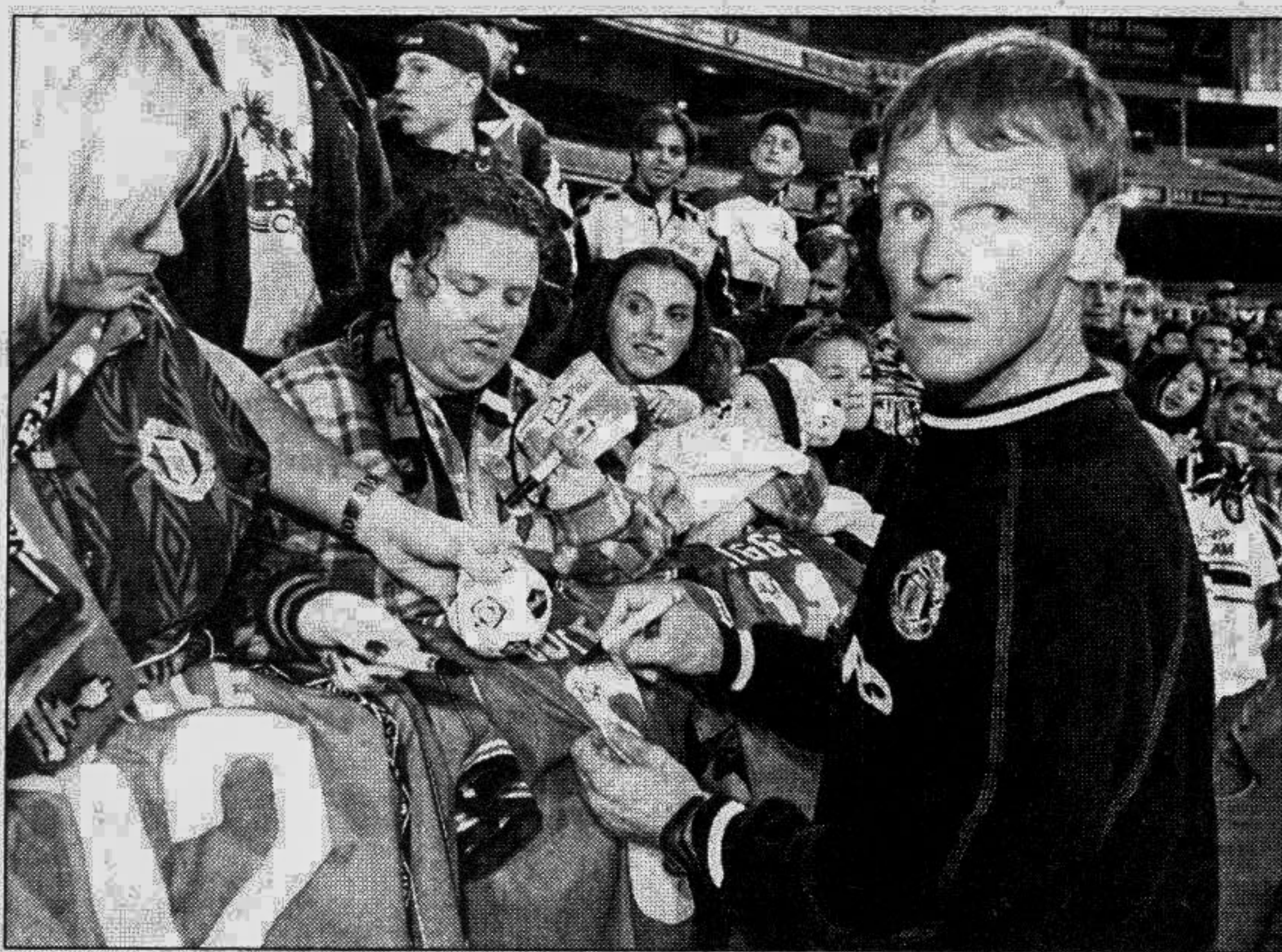
He told sports newspaper Tuttosport: "I want to put last season - and my problems, and Juventus' problems - behind me and to start winning. That's what I'm starting for, to win."

Strongest on strike

LA PAZ, July 14: Players with top Bolivian side The Strongest have gone on strike Monday as they have not been paid since May, reports AFP.

The club managed by Argentinean 1978 World Cup winning scorer Mario Kempes is in dire financial straits and on Friday adopted stringent austerity measures.

The La Paz club, over 90 years old, could be relegated if a solution is not found to the problems.



Manchester United's England international striker Teddy Sheringham obliging fans with autographs during a practice session at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) yesterday. — AFP photo

Rugged MCG greets MU



MELBOURNE, Australia, July 14: Manchester United's players were taken by surprise Wednesday at the bumpy Cricket Ground.

The European Cup and English league and cup champions arrived here early Wednesday for their two-match Australian tour and had a light training run on the famous MCG in the late afternoon before 1,000 local supporters.

"We're not going to make an issue of playing on a cricket pitch," said star striker Dwight Yorke.

"We're here to play a football game and if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for us."

Yorke, who is good friends with West Indian batting great Brian Lara, said he had played football on cricket pitches back in the Caribbean.

"I've watched lots of Test cricket over the years and it's great to actually run out here, it's not too bad," said Yorke, who joined United in August last year from Aston Villa for 12.6 million pounds.

Assistant manager Steve McClaren, who is deputising for team boss Sir Alex Ferguson --

who stayed at home for his July 21 Buckingham Palace investiture -- said of the MCG: "The players were obviously a little bit surprised, seeing what they are used to, but at the end of the day it's just like going to Wimbledon and playing at Selhurst Park."

Welsh wing Ryan Giggs said with a wry smile: "You can tell it's a cricket pitch anyway -- yeah, it's bumpy, but you get that in pre-season games, the pitches are hard, but you've just got to adapt to it."

"I'm a fan of cricket and to play in a stadium like this is a great honour," said Giggs, who has had just three weeks off since his last game for Wales on June 10.

"You don't lose much fitness in three weeks and we've been back a week now (in pre-season training), but obviously with the long flight we're a bit tired."

"We don't think about injuries going into a game, if you did that you'd go mad, you just hope that you don't get injured, but usually in pre-season games, lads don't get injured."

Yorke said United were treating the two matches against the Soccerex over the next four days as intense preparation for the new English season, which kicks off on August 8.

"It's been a very successful

year for us, but to come back from what we have achieved and getting back into the thick of things will take some time," he said.

"But we are treating this game and the one in Sydney on Sunday as very intense game and preparation for our campaign back in England."

Giggs said the first few games of a new season were about attaining a high fitness level.

"It's also about getting a feel of the ball after being away, getting used to playing games again, so we just use it as a base to get ourselves fit and obviously it's a bonus if we win," he said.

Norwegian striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer stood out of Wednesday's training run, but McClaren said there was no concern.

"He slept in the wrong position on the plane on the way over and he's got a stiff back today, so we left him out," he said.

McClaren said he had yet to decide on the starting line-up for Thursday's opener.

"We're going around the players after today's session, after flying for such a long time, they are feeling a little lethargic and hard to get going, but after a good night's sleep and another session tomorrow we'll make a judgment about lunch-time," he said.

L'pool deny Babel deal

LIVERPOOL, July 14: English Premiership side Liverpool have Monday denied they have a pre-contract deal to bring German international defender Markus Babel to Anfield, reports AFP.

Babel's present club Bayern Munich believe the player will move to Liverpool at the end of next season on a free transfer, when his current deal expires.

But Liverpool Monday denied any such deal exists. Club spokesman Ian Cotton said: "We have no agreement with the player."

Cotton was responding to claims by the German champions' vice-president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge that Babel had rejected a 7 million pounds bid from Real Madrid in favour of Liverpool.

"We believe that there is an agreement between Babel and Liverpool," Rummenigge said. "You cannot see his refusal for a move to Real Madrid in any other way."

"We would have let him go to Spain for their offer of 7 million pounds. It would have been foolish to refuse that with only a year left on his contract."

The previous offer from Liverpool was for half of that and that was not enough."

Babel denied that the Spanish club had approached him but admitted he wanted to play in the English Premiership.

"The fact is that I never had an offer from Real Madrid but my dream has always been to play in England," said Babel.

Hitzfeld plans to act tough

BONN, July 14 (Reuters/Internet): Bayern Munich trainer Ottmar Hitzfeld on Monday sought to restore team discipline as players again engaged in the public bickering which has earned the club the nickname "FC Hollywood".

"I am tightening the screws and from now on I will be taking action not talking about it. The standards will be tougher from now on and anyone who doesn't like it can watch from the stands," Hitzfeld said.

A number of incidents again brought attention to the German champions, who have a reputation for primadonna behaviour and are still struggling to pick the pieces after a last-minute defeat in the European Cup final by Manchester United to Werder Bremen on penalties.

First to feel the lash was Brazilian striker Giovanni Elber, who said he felt indisposed on Sunday and decided not to take part in training.

"I can't allow that so he's going to have to pay 5,000 marks (2,600 dollars)," Hitzfeld said.

Hitzfeld also had a "private audience" with Markus Babel, who has made public his dissatisfaction at not being allowed to transfer to Liverpool, saying that Bayern did not "play fair" on letting him leave.

Midfielder Mario Basler's grumbles about his position on the team have led to speculation about a lack of unity in the ranks. Basler is holding out for more money, saying he wants to earn as much on a new contract as new captain Stefan Effenberg.

Goalkeeper Oliver Kahn criticised veteran libero Lothar Matthaus about his plans to move mid-season to the United States to play for the New York-New Jersey Metro Stars, further contributing to a revival of the "FC Hollywood" tag.

South Australia can't afford Hooper

ADELAIDE, Australia, July 14: Former West Indies batsman Carl Hooper is expected to seek an English county cricket contract after a deal with South Australia broke down over money, reports AFP.

South Australia's cricket manager Greg Chappell said Sheffield Shield rules governing pay rates meant the state team could not afford Hooper, who lives in Adelaide with his Australian wife.

Under the agreement, the most a state player on a top-level contract can be paid is 40,000 Australian dollars (26,000 US dollars) with match payments bringing the total to 70,000 Australian dollars (46,000 US dollars).

Chappell did not say how much Hooper had asked for, but said the 32-year-old probably had offers to play county cricket in England.

"It would appear that there are options for him in England in county cricket and the money that they talk about over there is a lot different from the money that's available here," Chappell said Wednesday. "I would think it would be pretty difficult for any Australian state to meet the competition of the sort of money that's around in county cricket."

Chappell said the SACA's door was still open if Hooper wanted to accept the deal.

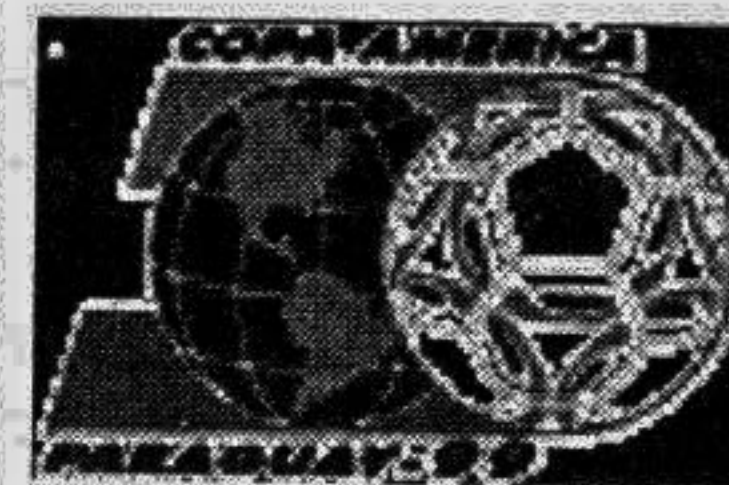
Hooper missed the first two tests of Australia's tour of the West Indies this year to stay in Adelaide to care for his sickly son. At the end of that tour, he announced his retirement from international cricket after a 12-year career which included 80 Tests and 182 one-day internationals.

Chappell said Hooper approached the SACA.

"It would have been nice to have him if he'd been available, it basically would have dropped in our lap, it would have been a bonus from that point of view but one door closes another door opens," Chappell said.

"What it probably means is that a young player who otherwise would have missed out is likely to get some opportunities, or a number of young players might get some opportunities now."

Unpleasant return for Argentina



self admitted.

The Independent forward, clearly unhappy at not playing in the Copa, had voiced his displeasure at his situation and Bielsa remonstrated with Calderon for his remarks, calling him a "rotter".

Calderon then called Bielsa "the son of a whore".

At this point Argentinean players Roberto Ayala and Diego Simeone separated the two men before blows could be exchanged.

Back in Buenos Aires Calderon confirmed the incident had taken place while Bielsa initially denied the bust-up before eventually admitting it.

Calderon said he would not play under Bielsa. "If Mr. Bielsa continues in the national team and calls me up again, I'm not going."

"Now I understand why the players from Europe didn't come," said Calderon referring to the top players whom Bielsa agreed to rest following a long season with their clubs.

"What I most lament is to have not played and to have spent 15 days wasting my time in Paraguay," he fumed.

"(On Monday) he told me that my style of play didn't fit in with his team, so I asked him why he picked me up in the first place."

"The truth always hurts. I am not sorry, I am very calm. I say what I think but without offending anyone," said the player.

Bielsa, who said he would still pick Calderon if the circumstances were right, admitted: "It wasn't all a garden of roses within the group."

The other players were reluctant to comment on the incident. Simeone said: "It's obvious things will happen during 40 days together but we do not have to publicise it."

Argentina lost a group match to Colombia - striker Martin Palermo missed three penalties in that game - before their last eight defeat by Brazil.

COPA SCORERS

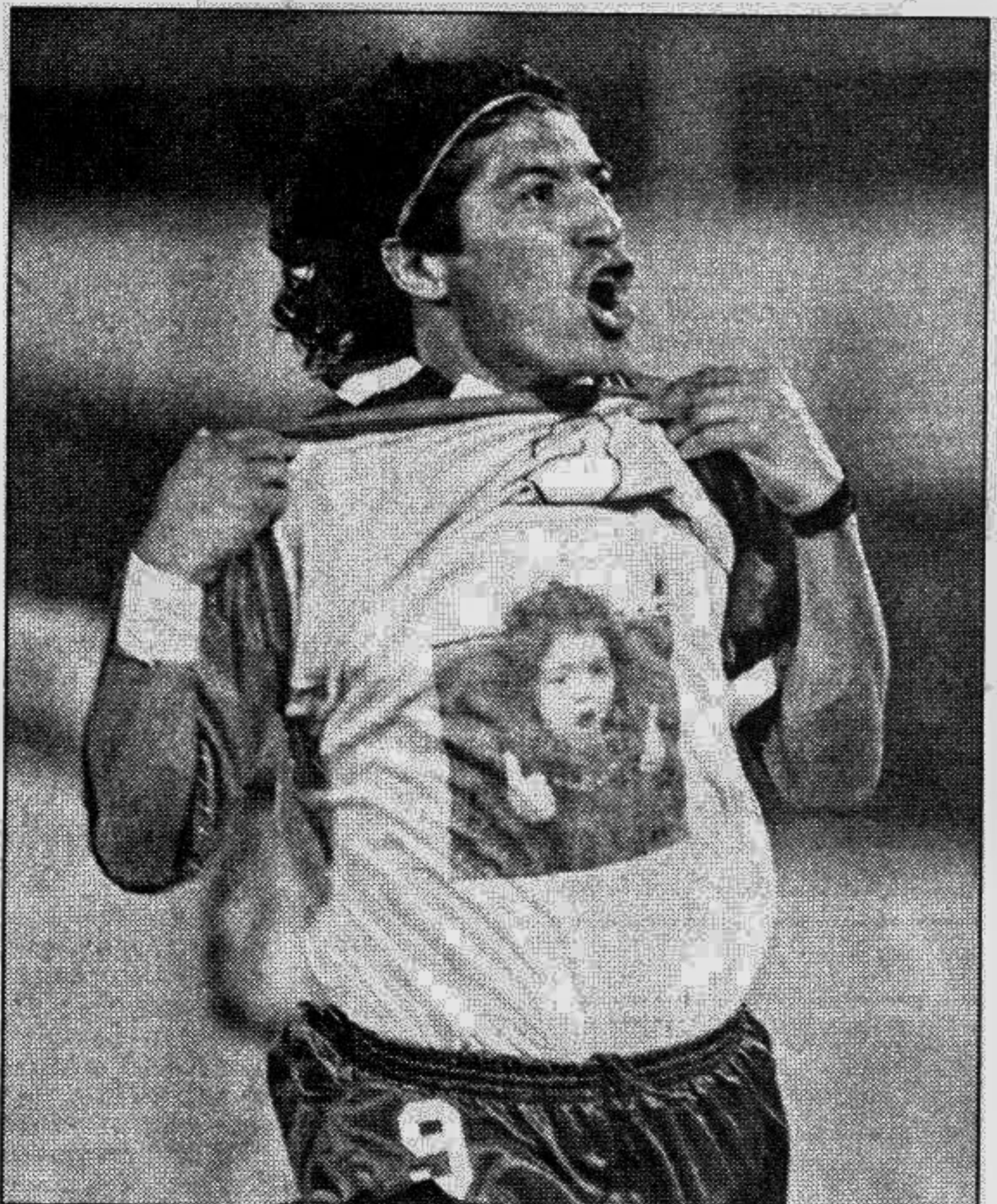
ASUNCION, July 14 (Reuters): Copa America goalscorers after Tuesday's semifinal between Chile and Uruguay game:

4: Ronaldo (Brazil), Roque Santa Cruz, Miguel Benitez (Paraguay), Martin Palermo (Argentina), Luis Hernandez (Mexico), Marcelo Zalayeta (Uruguay), Ivan Zamorano (Chile).

2: Roberto Holsen (Peru), Ivan Kaviedes (Ecuador), Wagner Lopes (Japan), Cuauhtemoc Blanco (Mexico), Rivaldo (Brazil), Pedro Reyes (Chile), Victor Bonilla (Colombia).

1: Atsuhiko Miura (Japan), Jorge Soto, Israel Zuniga, Roberto Palacios, Jose Pereda, Norberto Solano (Peru), Isaac Terrazas, Daniel Osorno, Gerardo Torrado (Mexico), Ronaldo Assis, Emerson Ferreira, Alex (Brazil), Diego Simeone, Christian Gonzalez, Juan Pablo Sorin (Argentina), Jose Luis Sierra (Chile), Jorge Bolano, Jhonner Montano, Ivan Cordoba, Edwin Congo, Hamilton Richard, Neider Morantes (Colombia), Erwin Sanchez (Bolivia), Gabriel Urdaneta (Venezuela), Ariel Graziani (Ecuador), Alejandro Lembo (Uruguay).

Note: Mexico and Japan were specially invited to take part.



Ivan Zamorano, the top Chilean striker is ecstatic after scoring the equaliser against Uruguay. — AFP photo

McGrath may match 'B' mania



LONDON, July 14 (Internet): Australian paceman Glenn McGrath will generate similar levels of interest in Worcestershire cricket as the signing of Ian Botham more than a decade ago, the club has said.

The New Road outfit pulled off a major coup when they snapped up Botham and his England team-mate Graham Dilley and began a golden trophy-laced period in the county's history.

Membership rocketed as Botham and Dilley provided the final pieces in the jigsaw of an emerging side as back-to-back County Championship and Sunday League titles were won.

Now Worcestershire are looking to McGrath, who is set to sign a two-year deal, reported to be worth 100,000 pounds a season, making a similar kind of impact.

The last major obstacle was removed when the Australian Cricket Board gave clearance on Monday for McGrath to play county cricket.

The imminent capture of McGrath will be a timely boost as the county's 5,000 membership has dropped this season by about 300, with fans citing a haphazard fixture list and lack of home Sunday fixtures in the National League.

Worcestershire secretary

Mike Vockins said: "Glenn McGrath is rated the number one bowler in the world and I am sure the interest generated will be the same as when the county signed Ian Botham and Graham Dilley."

"The membership went up quite strikingly in 1987 when it

Glenn McGrath's capabilities will give some real fire-power.

"With the likes of McGrath, (Shane) Warne or (Muttiah) Muralitharan, you would be looking for someone of that kind of class and ability to take wickets."

McGrath had Worcestershire recommended to him by Tom Moody, the player he is replacing as overseas professional.

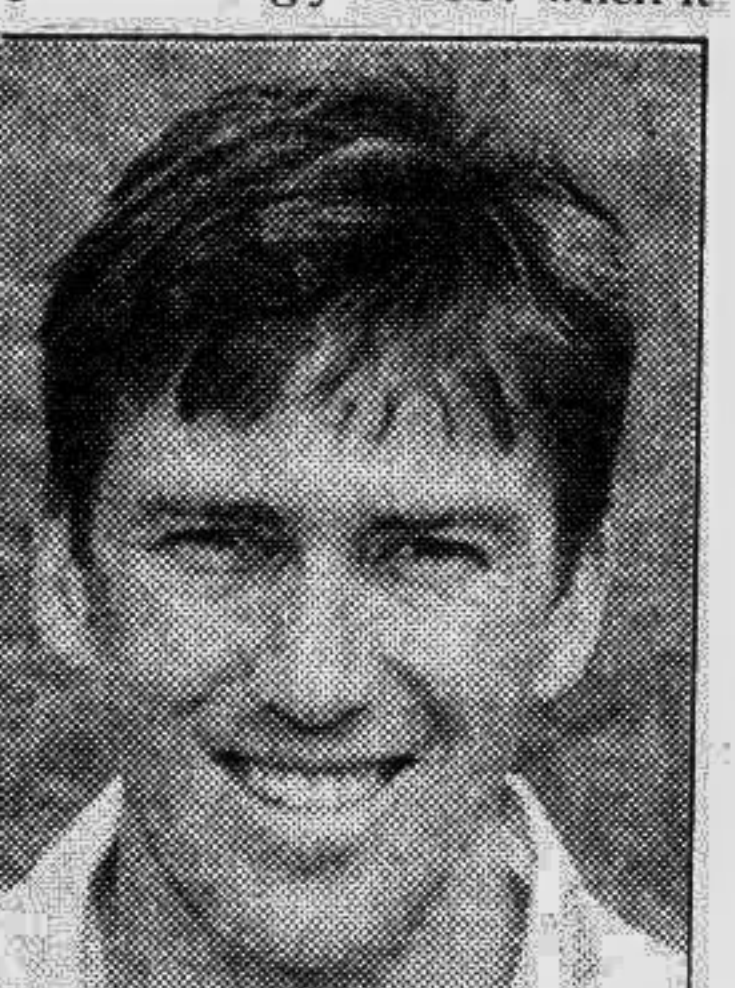
The current Worcestershire captain has played a key part in advising Worcestershire and McGrath since talks were first held in early May and the news broke of his capture on World Cup final day.

Moody said: "I knew the county were keen to get a strike bowler and I've done everything possible to ensure they get who they want, namely Glenn McGrath."

"I think Worcestershire have to get over the final hurdle with the negotiations but I've had a number of chats with Glenn and told him Worcestershire is a good county to sign for."

"I'm obviously a bit biased but he is pretty keen to go there and it would mean a lot to Worcestershire to have a world-class strike bowler of his quality."

"With the growing success of Alamgir Shieriyar, I don't think Worcestershire will be spending a session trying to knock over numbers eight, nine, 10 and 11 in the batting order!"



GLENN MCGRATH

was announced those two players would be coming to Worcestershire and there was a lot of excitement generated.

"I am sure that excitement will be there again when people start looking to next season."

"We have had some very good bowlers and have a promising young crop now but a bowler of

Trist to scrutinise support crew



CHRISTCHURCH, July 14 (New Zealand Herald): Newly appointed national cricket coach David Trist is poised to turn a critical eye on his side's extensive management team.

Trist, a 51-year-old former New Zealand seamer, was confirmed as Rixon's replacement yesterday and will begin a two-year contract in the job beginning on September 1.

Former New Zealand captain Jeff Crowe will replace John Graham as the national team's manager.

Speaking from Holland yesterday, Trist said his first job would be to assess the benefits of the national team's support crew, which quite apart from the physio, include a technical advisor, a sports psychologist, and a computer-analysis expert.

The man who has already coached Canterbury, Holland, Eastern Province in South Africa, Hong Kong and, most recently, Auckland, wants to be clear about the exact roles within the entourage, and will reserve judgment until after he meets New Zealand Cricket officials.

"It's time to review the current coaching process and the management team," Trist said after his appointment was announced yesterday by NZC chief

executive Chris Doig.

"I envisage a period of consultation at first, during which there's a chance to talk to different people about different aspects of the job. I don't want anyone to think these people aren't beneficial to the team - rather we have to sort out whether we're utilising them in the best way."

Trist will also act as a selector in his term, following the trend set by Glenn Turner and Rixon.

He views the New Zealand's ongoing batting woes as a problem which could be alleviated through more intense competition for places, but said developing that sort of environment was more a task for the administration.

"I'd love to see a more established New Zealand A side, through which our younger, emerging players could stake their claims for the international team."

"It's vitally important that there's pressure on places in the national side, so players are aware that under-achievement may result in them being replaced."

That's something I'm going to be on about when I come back. It's a very important dynamic."

Trist's first assignment will be the tour to India in October, followed by a crammed interna-

tional schedule including home series against the West Indies and Australia, and subsequent tours to the Caribbean, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

He secured the job ahead of a shortlist which is understood to have included former New Zealand players John Wright, John Bracewell and Dipak Patel, as well as former Canterbury coach Denis Aberhart.

Trist represented Canterbury as a pace bowler between 1970 and 1978, and was called up by New Zealand at the end of the 1969 England tour as a replacement for the injured Dick Motz. He played three matches in India and Pakistan on the return journey without playing in a Test.

His appointment as coach was yesterday given a slightly reluctant endorsement from the Auckland Cricket Association, to whom he had initially been contracted for a potential three years.

ACA chief executive Lindsay Crocker said it was a bitter-sweet experience for his association, who were delighted with Trist's first year at the helm last season.

"We're certainly not pleased to see him go," Crocker said yesterday. "We're disappointed to lose him and it's a shame he won't be able to finish off the job he started."

A financial jackpot



MELBOURNE, Australia, July 14: Money-making football giants Manchester United are hoping their four-match tour of Australia and China will help generate more cash for their already bulging coffers, reports AFP.

Club chief Martin Edwards Wednesday spoke of his famous Red Devils as a world-wide brand as 'Manchester United Inc.' arrived here for two pre-season matches against Australia.

The football world's richest and most glamorous club has long transcended the divide between sport and business with the English league and cup champions making 29.6 million pounds profit last year after excluding players' transfer fees.

United, who have legions of supporters throughout the world, are looking to capitalise on their phenomenal success during their four-match tour of Australia and China over the next week.

"We always try to expand, we make no secret of that," Edwards said here at the start of United's first tour of Australia

in 15 years. "We're looking to expand our brand, we are a world-wide brand and if by spreading the gospel that helps us to market ourselves world-wide, great, that's one of the things we aim to do."

Emphasising United's popular appeal came an announcement here Wednesday that Australia's Woolmark company had signed an agreement with the club and its sportswear suppliers Umbro to market a new fabric for the club's shirts for the 2000-2001 English season.

"This is a unique project in world football," said United deputy chief executive Peter Kenyon Wednesday.

"Manchester United are innovators and constantly set new standards in football and the development and marketing of a performance sportswear line ensure our players have the latest and best technologies to support their performance."

Edwards said he was not close to making a decision on whether to sell the 14 per cent of the club he personally owns.

Following last year's failed 1.81 billion dollar (1.19 billion US) bid by Rupert Murdoch's pay television company BSkyB,

there has been fresh speculation that interest in United has been expressed by the Sultan of Brunei.

"People get carried away with that, I've had approaches but I've made no decision on that whatsoever," Edwards said.

Edwards said the club did not solicit the Murdoch offer and had never actively tried to sell the club but was beholden to consider any offers because it is a publicly listed company.

"We weren't trying to sell the club before that and we've not tried to sell the club since, but if an offer comes along, as a public company you have a duty to consider it," Edwards said.

"You can't preclude people coming in and making an offer but we haven't got a big 'For Sale' sign up outside Old Trafford," he said.

Under BSkyB's bid, which was blocked by regulators, Edwards' personal stake in the club was valued at 229 million dollars (151 million US) and he was to get a seat on the BSkyB board.

Manchester United were listed in 1991 and were clearly the most successful of the many clubs which had also hit the stock exchange boards.

China brace for Beckham



SHANGHAI, July 14: Chinese soccer fans were elated Wednesday at reports English star midfielder David Beckham will join his Manchester United teammates for a sold-out exhibition match in Shanghai next week, reports AFP.

The official Shanghai News, quoting organisers, said Beckham will arrive here from Britain on Tuesday, slightly before his teammates.

He decided to skip the Australia leg of the team's pre-season tour which begins Thursday, in part due to his honeymoon with