

FA dismisses United's FA Cup return

LONDON, Aug 6: The Football Association have rejected suggestions that Manchester United are on the verge of a shock return to the FA Cup, reports AFP.

United withdrew from the competition to play in the World Club Championship in Brazil.

But a newspaper report on Friday said the FA had come up with a plan that would allow United to defend the trophy they won last year.

The report suggested that the Treble winners would be offered a new chance to defend the FA Cup by allowing the club to drop out of the Worthington Cup and extend the Premiership season.

Bayern's Sergio ruled out

MUNICH, Germany, Aug 6: Bayern Munich's pre-season injury crisis deepened here on Thursday as Brazilian star Paulo Sergio underwent a hernia operation.

The 30-year-old Sergio, who played in Brazil's 1994 World Cup winning side and who has just been signed from Italian side AS Roma, will now miss the German champions' Bundesliga opener against Hamburg on August 14.

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said: "We chose to go for the hernia surgery now because we didn't want him to drop out half-way through the season and possibly miss more games than he is already going to."

Bayern's goalkeeper and captain Oliver Kahn, playmaker Stefan Effenberg and defender Samuel Kuffour are all currently injured.

Striker Giovane Elber, meanwhile, is back in training but still finding his feet after a knee operation which sidelined him for much of last season, including the Champions League final defeat to Manchester United.

Lothar Matthaus is also struggling with muscular problems after Germany's disastrous showing in Mexico in the Confederations Cup.

Sheffields consider merger

SHEDFIELD, England, Aug 6: The managing director of English first division club Sheffield United said on Friday he believed merger talks with Premiership city rivals Sheffield Wednesday would begin "sooner rather than later".

After a report revealed the two clubs as English football's biggest loss-makers during the 1997-98 season - losing over 16.5 million pounds (25 million dollars) between them - managing director John Thurman spoke out in favour of a merger between the two Yorkshire clubs.

Thurman told the Yorkshire Post daily: "It would be a radical idea, but one that is increasingly will have to come under active consideration."

Celades joins Barca exodus

BARCELONA, Aug 6: Barcelona continued their clear out for the new season on Thursday, selling Spanish international midfielder Albert Celades to Celta Vigo for an undisclosed fee, reports Reuters.

Celades, who had spent five seasons at the Catalan club since joining as an 18-year-old in 1994, found himself surplus to the requirements of coach Louis Van Gaal at the end of last season and was told to look for another club.

Barcelon have off-loaded a total of seven players since the end of last season.

Two more long-serving Barca men - defender Miguel Angel Nadal and Midfielder Roger Garcia - are also on the unwanted list and are expected to leave before the new season starts on August 22.

Casiraghi in a mess

LONDON, Aug 6: Chelsea's Italian striker Pierluigi Casiraghi fears that his top level soccer career could be over after nine months out with a knee injury, reports Reuters.

"I have no idea when I will play again," the 30-year-old former Italy international told the sun newspaper today.

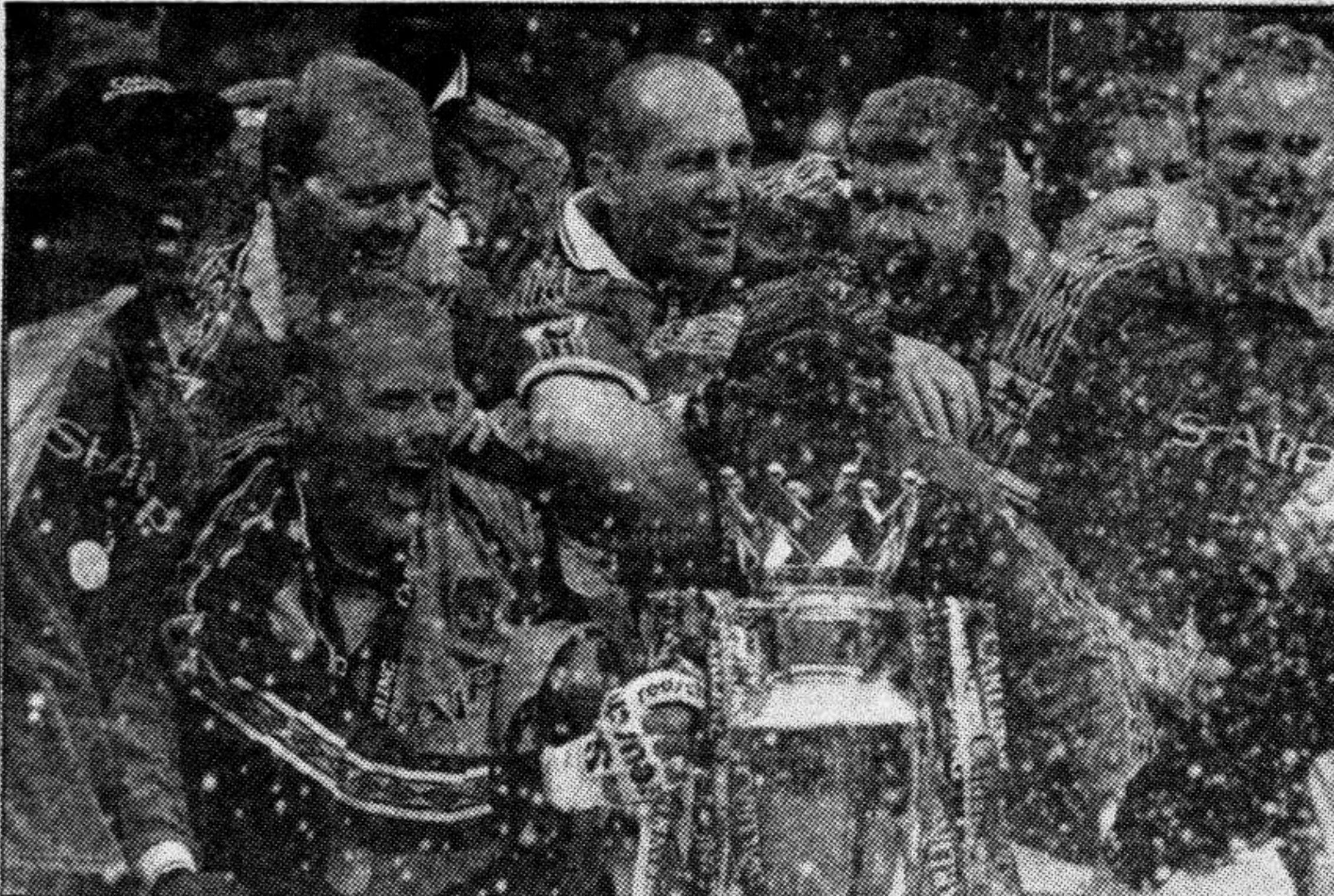
"All I want is to get back on a football field for one game, it doesn't matter if it's in the Third Division, Serie C or an amateur side," he added.

Casiraghi played 12 games for Chelsea last season after joining from Lazio in a nine million dollar transfer.

Border believes in Tendulkar

MUMBAI, Aug 6: Former Australian skipper, Allan Border, Thursday said the newly appointed Indian cricket captain Sachin Tendulkar would need less than 12 months to settle down as a successful captain.

"Sachin has now attained the age where he is more matured. He has had the chance to formulate ideas on how he should approach captaincy and hence he should settle down to his new job within 12 months," Border, the highest run-getter in Test cricket (11,174 runs), who is here to take part in the Royal Palms and Country Inns Golf Tournament, told PTI.



An AFP file photo of victorious Manchester United players posing with the English Premier League trophy on the final day of the 1998-99 season. United went on complete a unique treble.

English Premiership

Let the party begin

Lenin Gani

Is it going to be 'Simply Red' again? I'm referring of course to the last English Premier League of the century that kicks off from today. Just as the 1998-99 season proved it should be a straight fight between Manchester United, Arsenal and Chelsea while the other 17 clubs will be left to fend for whatever is left. Some like Liverpool will be hoping to see the light at the end of the tunnel while others like new boys Bradford, Bradford won't be troubling the top guns instead only fighting for survival. The third promoted side Sunderland, has the expertise in Peter Reid and facilities that are state-of-the-art, to suggest it might embarrass lesser Premier sides such as Southampton, Coventry, Everton and Wimbledon. Shefford Wednesday's time in the top flight may have run out too.

Following is a selection of teams likely to finish in my top ten next May.

MANCHESTER UNITED

In all probability Sir Alex Ferguson's mighty Red machine will come pretty close to emulating their fantastic campaign of last season. While other clubs have been involved in hectic summer shopping, Fergie has hardly needed to change the furniture at Old Trafford. The boss has been busy launching an autobiography and dealing with some Australians who are angry at Andy Cole's nasty tackle.

The major difference will be in goal with newly acquired Australian Mark Bosnich from Aston Villa replacing Great Dane Peter Schmeichel.

United's strength will once come from the wealthy midfield manned by David Beckham, Roy Keane, Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes ensuring that its lethal frontline of Yorke, Cole and Sheringham never goes goal hungry.

It'll also be interesting to see how does competing in the much talked about inaugural World Club Championship in Brazil next January, affect their performance in the long run.

ARSENAL

Arsenal who gave United a real run for their money by pushing the title race to the final day, look on paper again as likely challengers.

Manager Arsene Wenger after bringing Nicolas Anelka's long-running 'transferology' to an end, immediately signed World Cup '98's Golden Boot winner Davor Suker of Croatia. The unsettled Real Madrid striker was part of the Anelka deal. Pursuing combative Frenchman Thierry Henry from Italian giants Juventus came next.

LIVERPOOL

When Gerrard Houllier took over at Anfield last year he said it take sometime before the Liverpool faithful could sing again. Even he couldn't imagine the rollercoaster ride he was getting on.

First he had to surrender gifted Steve McManaman to Real Madrid but worse was to

come; endure a year without domestic honours and forget about European competitions.

Faced by such a predicament the Frenchman has done a complete overhaul of the system. Out went players like the temperamental England international Paul Ince, long-serving goalkeeper David James and in came a foreign legion of

Europe.

CHELSEA

Chelsea's title aspirations faded away at the cost of attempting to become the first and last club to defend the European Cup Winners' Cup. Under UEFA's ambitious programme the competition has been scrapped.

Although the Londoners managed to reach the semifinals by then injuries started to creep in. As a result the line-up was constantly being shuffled and so Tore Andre Flo and Gianfranco Zola hardly knew whether they were starting or on the bench.

Like erratic Liverpool, the Magpies struggled to keep pace with the front-runners. They never found scoring goals that a problem conceding goals definitely was.

WEST HAM UNITED

The Hammers will be hard pressed to improve on their remarkable fifth spot. It guaranteed them a place in Europe at the first attempt.

The midfield too has been beefed up with the arrival France's World Cup winning captain Didier Deschamps. Also the departure of playmaker Brian Laudrup should not be a problem for a club that boasts a deluxe substitutes' bench. Each a match-winner in his own right.

Vialli will be hoping that this time the infusion of continental style will finally get the Blues to believe they can go on in mid-table.

ASTON VILLA

John Gregory must have felt like the gambler who had lost everything on a roll of a dice.

While the luck lasted there was no stopping the Midlands club that saw it go 12 matches unbeaten setting the pace during the early season. Prospects of playing in the Champions League started to buzz in Gregory's head. Neither did Villa get a chance to play Europe's elite nor did they succeed in the FA Cup thanks to Kevin Keegan's Fulham.

MIDDLESBROUGH

Bryan Robson has made great strides at the north England outfit. After initially struggling to maintain consistency it managed to put together some good results that saw Boro climb out of the relegation zone.

Robbo, once touted as a future national coach, also brought some exciting players like Brazilian Juninho. Unfortunately couldn't keep him long enough.

Among his successes include the revival of Paul Gascoigne's sagging career. That is something even Hoddle found difficult to do. The addition of Ince will certainly boost the midfield.

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR

George Graham brought much-needed direction to White Hart Lane.

He also guided them to a prophecy something his predecessors failed to accomplish.

Although they won't be serious title contenders and aim at filling their empty show cabin with local silverware, they are still an exciting team to watch that's why David Ginola was voted professional footballer-of-the-year.

"You just wonder at times - I was discussing things with our World Cup bid yesterday - and wondering why they can't look at a particular country, sort out the facilities, sort out the practicalities, and concentrate on that."

"It's becoming really as unusual as the bidding for the Olympics and from that point of view it's a concern."

Taylor is ready to consider the introduction of a midwinter break - which is commonplace throughout Europe.

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Barthez, Evangelista burgled

ROQUEBRUNE-CAP-MARIN, France, Aug 6: The Riviera home of French World Cup winning goalkeeper Fabien Barthez and his supermodel girlfriend Linda Evangelista was burgled overnight Wednesday as the couple slept upstairs, police confirmed here on Saturday, reports AFP.

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Arsenal's friendly caution

LONDON, Aug 6: Arsenal vice-chairman David Dein has warned Real Madrid to beware of their latest multi-million dollar signing Nicolas Anelka, reports AFP.

The London club know what it is like to be on the receiving end of Anelka's moody tantrums and are convinced the Spanish side will also have problems with him.

The Highbury chief Dein went through two months of turmoil over the sale of the 23 million pound France international striker and now he believes the "infant terrible" will strike again.

His scathing attack on the 20-year-old comes despite the Gunners withdrawing their FIFA complaint over the way the Spanish club, the player and his two agent brothers went about his move to Madrid.

"We couldn't decide which would be better between Yokohama and Urawa," the Japan Organizing Committee (JAWOC) general secretary Yasuhiro Endo told reporters after the executive committee meeting's final decision.

"But it is the final match of the World Cup and we wanted more people to be able to watch. That is the biggest reason why we chose Yokohama. Urawa will stage the semi-final match," he added.

There are 70,718 seats at the Yokohama Stadium, while the Saitama Soccer Stadium in Urawa, to be constructed by May 2001, has 63,060 seats.

FIFA regulations stipulate the stadium to hold the final match should have at least 60,000 seats. Only Yokohama and Urawa met the requirement among 10 candidate stadiums in Japan.

The World Cup finals are to be held in Japan's rainy season, which could spell problems for press covering matches. The press tribune is not covered by the stadium roof.

At last year's Dynasty Cup competition, which marked the opening of the stadium, most press seats were covered in snow.

The stadium design also creates problems for spectators, with some seats unable to see certain parts of the ground.

Endo dismissed the question of lack of shelter in parts of the stadium.

"I guarantee that within two years Anelka will be doing exactly the same in Spain."

Dein added: "That is why it is vital that we get together to force through legislation that will prevent players like Anelka doing exactly as they wish."

"I have already spoken to Ken Bates at Chelsea and Martin Edwards at Manchester United and we are all together on this. I will also be speaking to high-profile chairman abroad because this is not just a matter for English football, it's a world-wide concern."

Judge by Liverpool's pre-season form the money has wisely spent. The only concern is how rapidly will Michael Owen recover from the pulled hamstring. And of course making sure that strike partner Robbie Fowler doesn't get up to any mischief. No excuses will be accepted this time if the one-time giants don't qualify for Europe.

NEWCASTLE UNITED

Dutchman Ruud Gullit promised to introduce what he called 'sexy football' to Newcastle. Armed with unlimited cheque power he searched far and wide for the right players to fit his needs.

Now Stam is struggling for Sunday's Goodison Park clash, meaning midfielder Roy Keane could be drafted into central defence.

Keane is ready to return after being out since the end of last season with an ankle injury and he has played at the back successfully for United and his previous club Nottingham Forest in the first attempt.

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MANCHESTER UNITED

Manager Sir Alex Ferguson was already without Gary Neville, Wes Brown, Ronny Johnsen and David May through injury, leaving Henning Berg, Denis Irwin, Jaap Stam and Phil Neville as his only fit defenders.

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LEEDS UNITED

Manager Harry Redknapp has done a superb job getting the best out of his motley team. On the downside there was no stopping the Midlands club that saw it go 12 matches unbeaten setting the pace during the early season. Prospects of playing in the Champions League started to buzz in Gregory's head. Neither did Villa get a chance to play Europe's elite nor did they succeed in the FA Cup thanks to Kevin Keegan's Fulham.

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