

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 Giovanni Elber, meanwhile, is back in training but still finding his feet after the 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

SHEFFIELD, 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", reports AFP.

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 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 Celtic 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.

Barcelona 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."

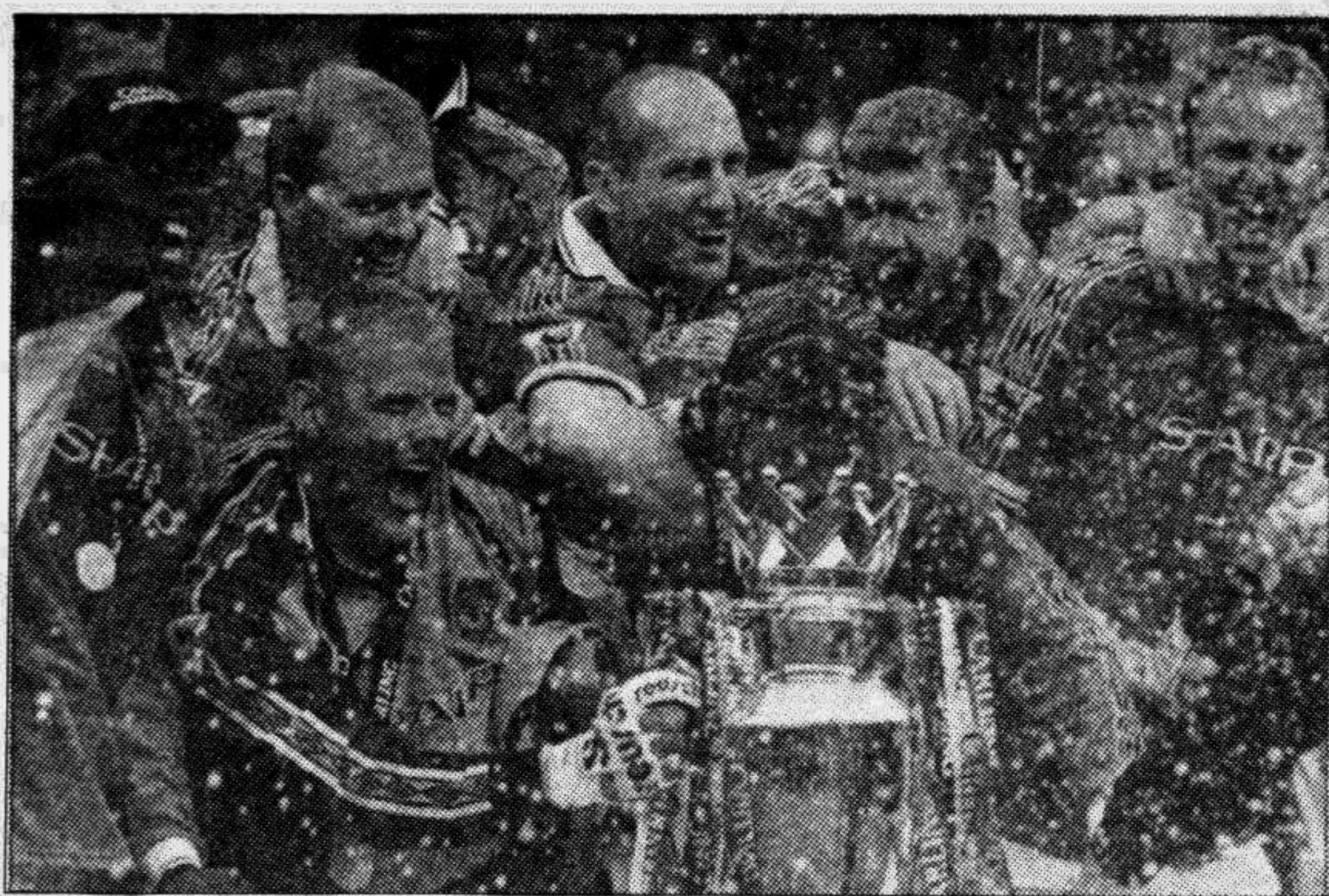
"All I want is to get back on a football field for one game, it doesn't matter if it's in the Third Division, Serie C or an amateur side," he added.

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 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



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, Watford 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. Sheffield 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 Gregor Danks. 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 fronting of Yorke, Cole and Shearman never goes goal hungry.

It is also interesting to see how does competing in the World Cup 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 contenders.

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

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

Lenin Gani

The Croatia-French pair may help reduce the dependence on Dutch star Dennis Bergkamp. Bergkamp has rarely been seen during the pre-season. They also blend well with exciting Nigerian Nwankano Kanu.

Last Saturday the Gunners raised the curtain - making sure the Charity Shield stayed in north London - now with United busy in Brazil it will give the Wenger the chance to erase the painful memories 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.

Gianluca Viali has now sacrificed his playing career to concentrate wholly on management. He secured prolific Blackburn Rovers striker Chris Sutton for a club record 10 million pounds to fill the void the Italian's retirement has created.

The midfield too has been beefed up with the arrival of David O'Leary he gradually moulded a unit once so reliant on defence into a well-balanced mixture of youthful raw talent and attacking. It enabled the Midlands club reach fourth place.

The departure of top striker Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink to Atletico Madrid will certainly blunt its razor sharp attack when they play in the UEFA Cup.

LEEDS UNITED

Leeds United were the darlings of the Premiership last year. Under the watchful eyes of David O'Leary he gradually moulded a unit once so reliant on defence into a well-balanced mixture of youthful raw talent and attacking. It enabled the Midlands club reach fourth place.

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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 players.

Judging 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 do exactly that.

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

Manager Harry Redknapp has done a superb job getting the best out of his motley team. On the downside there was Hartson-Berkovic row and not forgetting the hot-headed Paolo Di Canio's pushing of a referee.

If he can keep these unsavoury incidents to a bare minimum they look liking ending 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 mid-field.

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

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

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

BARTHEZ, Evangelista burgled ROQUEBRUNE-CAP-MARTIN, 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 Thursday, reports AFP.

The thieves, who broke into the home of the 27-year-old Monaco player and the 33-year-old Evangelista by breaking a downstairs window, made off with 170,000 dollars worth of jewellery, a portable computer and a mobile phone.

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.

"Anelka has left a massive scar on the face of English football," he said.

"In the space of 48 hours he and Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink have ridden roughshod over all the rules of English football and shown a huge lack of respect for the fans and what the game should stand for."

"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 chairmen abroad because this is not just a matter for English football, it's a world-wide concern."

Stam scare for MU

LONDON, Aug 6: Treble winners Manchester United are faced with a defensive injury crisis before their opening game of the new English Premiership season at Everton on Sunday, reports AFP.

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.

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 past.

Andersson returns home

NEWCASTLE, England, Aug 6: Newcastle United's Swedish striker Andreas Andersson has returned home to AIK Stockholm, reports AFP.

The 25-year-old international has gone back to Scandinavia in a deal thought to be worth 2 million pounds (3 million dollars).

Andersson, who scored against England for his country last September, joined Newcastle from AC Milan in a 3.6 million deal in February last year, when Kenny Dalglish was manager. But the marksman has failed to impress Newcastle boss Ruud Gullit.

"I am very pleased to be back home," he said. "I am looking forward to playing for Stockholm because I did not feel I was appreciated by Newcastle."

Pearce to Skipper West Ham

LONDON, Aug 6: Veteran full-back Stuart Pearce will captain his new club West Ham United against Tottenham Hotspur in the English Premiership on Saturday, reports AFP.

The 37-year-old former Nottingham Forest and England left-back, who spent last season languishing in the Newcastle reserves, only signed a one-year deal with the London side on Monday.

Spurs eying Leonhardtsen

LONDON, Aug 6: English Premiership club Tottenham Hotspur hope to complete the signing of Liverpool's Norwegian international midfielder Oyvind Leonhardtsen on Friday for around 2.5 million pounds (around 4 million dollars), reports AFP.

Tottenham Director of Football David Platt rejected reports on Thursday that the deal was already done and that Leonhardtsen had passed a medical and accepted personal terms at White Hart Lane.

But that could be the case within the next 24 hours although Platt admitted: "I don't know if we can complete everything in time for him to be available for our first game of the season at West Ham on Saturday."

"But we have made Liverpool an offer and they have given us permission to speak to the player."

Leonhardtsen, who will be 29 a week on Tuesday, joined Liverpool two years ago from Wimbledon for nearly 4 million pounds (6.5 million dollars).

Final in Yokohama

TOKYO, Aug 6: The Yokohama Stadium was officially chosen for the venue to stage the final match of the 2002 World Cup, co-hosted by Japan and South Korea, Japan's organising committee announced Friday, reports AFP.

"We couldn't decide which would be better between Yokohama and Urawa," the Japan Organizing Committee (JAWOC) general secretary Yasuhiko 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.

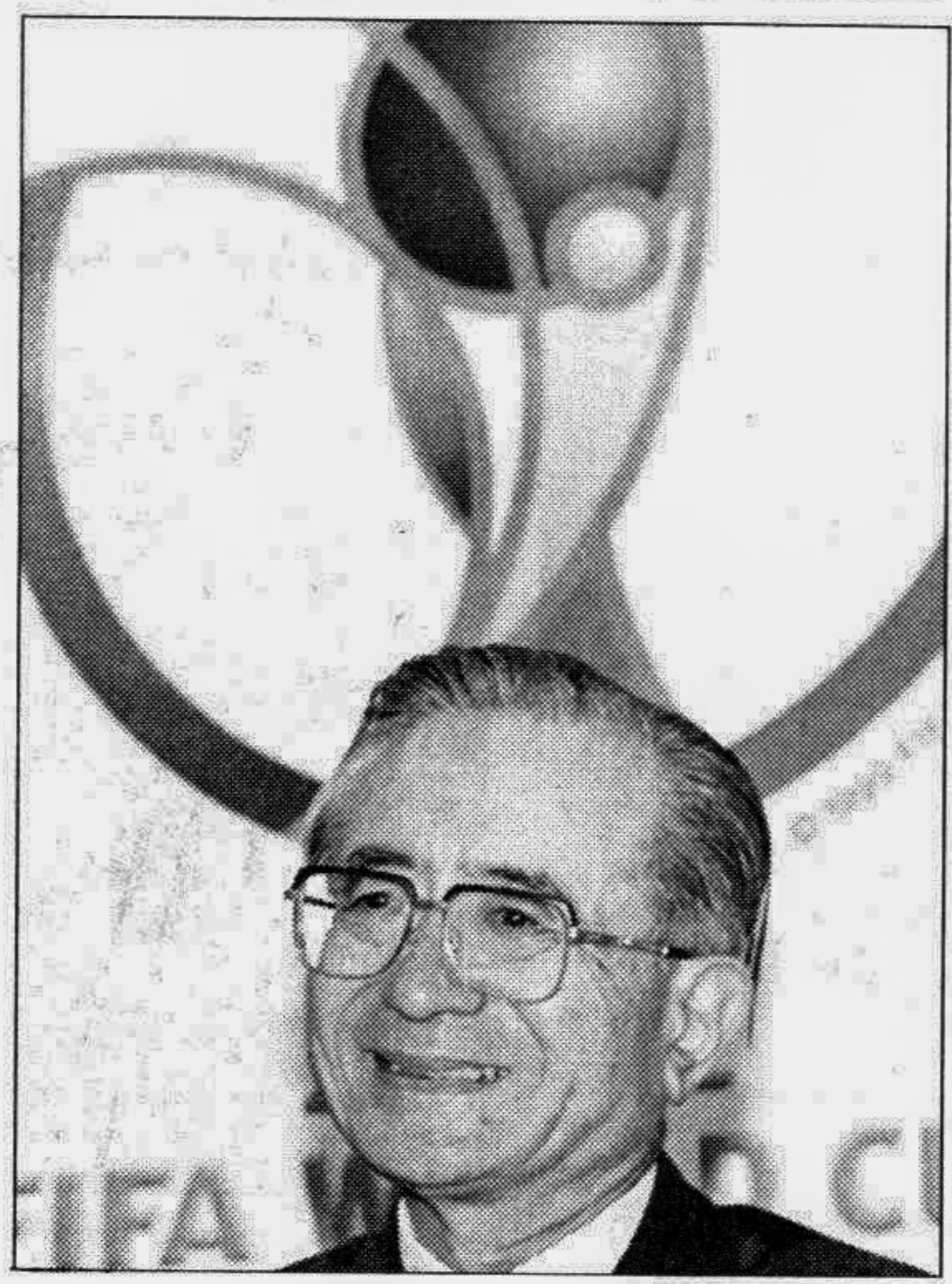
At last year's Dynasty Cup competition, which marked the opening of the stadium, most press seats were covered in snow.

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 know the problem in rain. When I met the Yokohama mayor, I already asked him to resolve the problem," said Endo.

JAWOC president Sho Nasu said: "Everybody knows there's a problem in rain. I'm sure



Sho Nasu, chairman of the Japan organising committee for the 2002 football World Cup, announcing Yokohama Stadium as the venue for the final in Tokyo yesterday.

— AFP photo

they've done something about it. Anyway, we moved a big step forward by finally deciding the host stadium of the final match officially."

Chelsea, Liverpool bookies' favourite



LONDON, Aug 6: British punters are taking an English Premiership gamble on football's big-spending season, according to Britain's bookmakers, reports AFP.

With the season kicking off on Saturday, Liverpool have been backed down from 20/1 to 10/1 for the championship and Chelsea are into 7/2 from 6/1.

Support for the pair has perhaps been the only thing which prevented the season as odds-on favourites to retain the title.

Instead, Sir Alex Ferguson's all-conquering side are best-priced 11/10 with bookmakers William Hill. Arsenal are second favourites and best-priced 11/4 at Ladbrokes.

William Hill's Graham Sharpe said football betting had lost none of its popularity but the public have decided only

a handful of teams can realistically win the Premiership.

Sharpe said: "Die-hard Watford fans are backing their team to win the division at 1,000/1 and hope springs eternal for all of us, but most people are looking at the handicap betting as the most realistic way of backing their team."

With United not playing the FA Cup, Arsenal are 5/1 favourites for the knock-out tournament, while Leeds and Liverpool are 8/1 joint-favourites for the League Cup.

At the bottom of the Premiership, few expect Watford or Bradford, to upset the odds and stay afloat. The promoted-duo are 4/11 to finish in the bottom three, with Southampton heading the rest at 7/4.

Southampton boss Dave Jones is top of the list of managers most likely to lose their jobs.

In division one Blackburn are red-hot favourites to bounce straight back into the Premier-

ship after last season's fall from grace. They are best-priced 15/8 ahead of Charlton, Fulham and Nottingham Forest.

One punter in Walsall, meanwhile, has shown an interest in betting that at least one match in the lower leagues will finish 7-7 during the season.

His own calculations concluded that there was a 299/1 chance of it happening and so William Hill have offered him those odds and are waiting to see if he has the courage of his convictions.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick-offs 1400GMT): Arsenal v Leicester, Chelsea v Sunderland, Coventry v Southampton, Leeds v Derby, Middlesbrough v Bradford, Newcastle v Aston Villa, Sheffield Wednesday v Liverpool, Watford v Wimbledon, West Ham v Tottenham.

Sunday (1500 GMT): Everton v Manchester United

Iron-fisted Houllier



LIVERPOOL, Aug 6 (Mail/Internet): The Gun'vor of Anfield is gone - now there is only Le Boss.

If anyone remains in doubt over the ruthless grip that Gerard Houllier now exerts on his Liverpool squad, there has been confirmation in the squeals of recrimination directed at the Frenchman, who has conducted the bloodiest revolution in the club's history.

Jason McAteer left Anfield for Blackburn in tears after being told he was no longer required. David James headed down the M6 to Aston Villa becoming the fact that Houllier had made it clear he had outlived his usefulness.

Sean Dundee joined VfB Stuttgart insisting Houllier had shown him from day one that his Liverpool ambitions were redundant, while at the weekend, the deposed Gun'vor, Paul Ince, was so embittered by his rejection that he called for Houllier's head.

But the only person manning the guillotine is Houllier. He has turned Anfield into his very own Bastille, in which the hopes of no less than nine of the squad were first shackled, then the bodies disposed of. More are certain to follow.

In Norway last week, when told of Dundee's criticism that the manager had virtually ignored him, Houllier peered from behind his scholarly spectacles, smiled bleakly and said simply: "He's right!"

This week, in response to the tirade that may manacle Ince if he is found guilty by the Football Association of bringing the game into disrepute, Houllier displayed utter contempt. Perseverely, it was almost as if he took Ince's rantings as a compliment, proof that he really is now the only ruler of Anfield.

In Oslo, where Liverpool played Valerenga in their annual Scandinavian showpiece, there was further evidence that Houllier has instituted a new regime.

No longer is there a drinking culture within the club. Alcohol was banned during the trip and not just because it cost around 6 pounds for a beer. Houllier has brought in so many foreign players in his 40 million pounds turnover of staff that his French accent on sobriety will not be a problem for them.

As Continental players, they were brought up in the abstemious belief that alcohol

should figure only rarely in the diet of athletes.

British players retained a larger mentality but that no longer applies under Houllier. He may come across as an introspective Eurocrat but he is now proving that he not only has a heart of iron but a merciless streak, to boot.

Houllier is determined to become the man who returns Liverpool to former glories and that steely attitude has won the admiration of a former Anfield great, Jan Molby was an integral part of the last Liverpool team to lift the title nine years ago and he believes Houllier has the same single-minded strength of character that fired Sir Alex Ferguson to the top of his profession.

Molby can even see their paths crossing in Europe this time next year after tipping Houllier to lead a new-look Liverpool to a Champions League place.

Gerard comes across as a polite, charming fellow and I'm sure he is," said Molby. "But he has made it apparent that there is a ruthless streak just beneath the surface."

You look at all the great managers, past and present, from Bill Shankly to Sir Alex Ferguson, and they all had that in their make-up. I have been very impressed with the way he has pinpointed the problems and addressed them, particularly over Paul Ince.

Apart from being the wrong side of 30, in my view, by all accounts, liked to exert some influence in the dressing room. Houllier wasn't having that and has demonstrated that there can only be one Gun'vor at Anfield.

You don't mess with Houllier. There is now a togetherness about the players that has been

missing in recent seasons. It reminds me of a decade ago when your own reputation counted for nothing against the good of the team. We had a saying that you could only go so far as a bunch of talented individuals but could win anything in sight as a team. It is a philosophy that Houllier has clearly drummed into the current set-up.

Houllier is not going to allow anything to stand in his way as he attempts to arrest the Anfield decline, which began in the cosy smugness of their last championship win in season 1989-90 but has left the club with only the League Cup and FA Cup since.

Only last week, Houllier's vice-like grip on Anfield affairs was further demonstrated when the sports editor of one down-market tabloid was summoned to the ground to be told that one of his sportswriters was deemed to have been having a disruptive influence on some members of the squad.

Houllier made it clear that if the reporter again abused the privilege of access offered by the club, he would be banned.

Liverpool's manager is one of the most open and approachable of his breed. He is even prepared to commit Merseyside heresy by admitting his admiration for Sir Alex Ferguson. It should be no surprise, therefore, that he has taken a leaf out of the Scotsman's guide to successful management. Just as Ferguson did, Houllier has drained away the party animals from his squad.

He has also attacked another of Anfield's sacred cows by turning his dressing-room into a democratic state and undermining the Spice Boys culture that appeared to have convinced many of Liverpool's biggest names they were bigger than the club itself.

One story goes that, about two years ago, a player who wanted to go on a modelling assignment asked former manager Roy Evans what would happen if he failed to turn up for training the next day. He was told he would be deducted a week's wages. The player, it is rumoured, wrote out a cheque for 15,000 pounds there and then.

Apocryphal or not, other stories of similar contempt for a club that once dominated Europe have emanated from Anfield. Houllier will have heard most of them and is determined to hear no more.

Taylor wants harmonisation



LONDON, Aug 6: Players' union chief Gordon Taylor on Friday called on English football to harmonise its season with the rest of the world, reports AFP.

The chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association believes fixture congestion is already out of control and feels