

Euro bosses
meet Blatter

ZURICH, Switzerland, Aug 24: Bosses from some of Europe's elite football clubs on Monday called on FIFA president Sepp Blatter to drastically reduce the number of international friendlies, reports AFP.

A two-hour meeting between members of the so-called G-14 group of top European sides and the head of football's world governing body discussed moves aimed at harmonising the European calendar.

Blatter backed a proposal from the sides to re-structure the programme in order to form blocks in the year splitting domestic and continental club competitions, for national team matches and holidays.

The clubs told Blatter they were not opposed in principle to his controversial notion of staging the World Cup every two years.

But this was accompanied by a proviso that the overall calendar was properly synchronised. They also called for national federations to take over players' salaries while on national team duty.

Blatter, in turn, said FIFA would be looking at a suggestion to cut to four the number of days clubs should free players for national matches.

The G-14 delegation, fronted by Real Madrid president Lorenzo Sanz, was made up of delegates from AC Milan, Bayern Munich, Juventus, Olympique Marseille and FC Porto.

Other clubs in the group not present at the Zurich talks are Ajax, Barcelona, Borussia Dortmund, Inter Milan, Liverpool, Manchester United, Paris St Germain and PSV Eindhoven.

The discussions were the first of their kind between club bosses and the international football federation without the involvement of national federations.

Shalimov
banned for
doping

MILAN, Aug 24: Napoli's Russian international Igor Shalimov has tested positive for the banned anabolic steroid nandrolone and has been suspended from Italian soccer, the Italian Football League revealed on Monday, reports Reuters.

It said Shalimov failed a drug test after a Serie B match between Napoli and Lecce on May 16.

The League said in a statement after an executive meeting on Saturday that the former Spartak Moscow and Inter Milan midfielder had been suspended as a cautionary measure.

Shalimov, 30, made his debut for Spartak Moscow aged 17 and played for them between 1988 and 1991 before moving to Italy where he joined Foggia, then in Serie A.

He moved to Inter Milan a year later and after two seasons at the San Siro was moved to Germany's MSV Duisburg and Switzerland's Lugano.

He returned to Italy in 1995 and played for Udinese and Bologna before joining Serie B side Napoli last season.

Shalimov made his international debut for the Soviet Union at the 1990 World Cup. He played his last match for the Russians last year.

Briton, Linford Christie, the former 100 metres Olympic champion, and veteran Jamaican sprinter Merlene Ottey have both recently tested positive for nandrolone.

USA didn't
invite Iraqi
booters

WASHINGTON, Aug 24: US government officials and the country's sports federation strenuously denied Monday Iraqi claims that its nation's national football team had been invited to play in the United States, reports AFP.

The State Department, which would have to issue visas to the players, denied knowing anything about the alleged invitations which the Iraqi News Agency (INA) said were issued by the American national soccer federation.

"We have no information about any event and we have no idea of what the Iraqis are talking about," a State Department official told AFP after spokesman James Foley told a news briefing he would look into the matter.

Jim Moorehouse, communications director for the US Soccer Federation, the organization that sanctions all international football events in the United States, also said no invitations had been issued.

"We have had no contact with Iraq and we have no plans to play them," Moorehouse told AFP by phone from the federation's Chicago headquarters.

"We don't know where the reports are coming from but we do know that we haven't been in touch with the Iraqis."

Moorehouse allowed that a third party or promoter might have been in contact with the Iraqis but said even then, any matches organized would still have to be authorized by the federation.

"I guess there's a chance they could be trying to solidify things before they approach us but eventually we would have to sanction the games and we haven't heard word one about anything like this in the works."

Earlier Monday, INA said the country's national football team had been invited to play matches in the United States for the first time since the Gulf War.

Serie A's 'super seven'

MILAN, Aug 24: All eyes will be on the "Magnificent Seven" this weekend - when the stars of the Serie A begin potentially the toughest season in the history of Italian football, reports AFP.

No fewer than seven clubs, nearly half the Serie A, have a real chance of winning the coveted title after a record-breaking re-shuffle of the top players - particularly where it counts, in front of goal.

Traditionally, the title is destined for Turin or Milan. This time, champions AC Milan, Inter, Lazio, AS Roma, Juventus, Parma and Fiorentina



RONALDO

all have a legitimate claim to the championship.

The money which has been pumped into clubs in recent years by their multi-millionaire owners, for whom a football team is petty cash within a vast business empire, plus the advent of satellite television rights, has transformed the staid landscape of Italian soccer.

Today, the stories that dominate Italy's sports pages have one thing in common -- money: the world record 50 million dollar fee paid by Inter for Lazio's Christian Vieri, the record 5.5 million dollar net salary wrung from Juventus by Alessandro Del Piero, and the fruitless haggling over tens of millions of dollars by Lazio and Juventus for Arsenal's Nicolas Anelka.

Italian clubs have come into money and now they are spending it.

As a result, a rags-to-riches club like Parma, who only arrived in the Serie A in 1990 after decades in the wilderness of lower division football, have a team which, on paper, is second

to none. Backed by the Tanzi family's Parmalat milk empire, the team who won last season's UEFA and Italian Cups are ready for a serious title challenge after paying Udinese more than 40 million dollars for two players: Brazilian Marinho Amoroso and Ghana's Stephen Appiah.

Vieri, meanwhile, represents less than half of Inter's off-season spending as they re-build the team for new coach Marcello Lippi - the man who made Italian, European and world champions out of Juventus.

At Inter, both optimism and money are in unlimited supply thanks to the deep pockets of the club's backers, oil refinery tycoon Massimo Moratti and tyre manufacturers Pirelli.

Loyal fans have also invested in Moratti's Dream Team by queuing up to buy season tickets. The San Siro club expects to at least match last season's record sales figure of nearly 60,000.

The council-owned stadium's other tenants, AC Milan, are also expecting a bumper harvest from the fans after unexpectedly following two years of misery with the club's 16th league title.

The club president, TV tycoon and former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who admits he didn't splash out on Ronaldo two years ago for fear of damaging his public image, has again been careful in his spending.

The club, celebrating the 100th year since its founding by a nostalgic English expat as the "Milan Cricket and Football Club", has also bucked the popular trend by buying Italian instead of foreign.

Seven of their nine signings this summer were home-grown after Milan found out the hard way that too many players trying to integrate into a new country, culture, football and language causes trouble.

Juventus will, meanwhile, be hoping that Del Piero continues his successful return from knee surgery and takes them back to the top after probably the worst season in their illustrious history.

Juventus finished only sixth in the table, saw their coach resign and were unbelievably dumped out of the European Cup semi-finals by Manchester United after leading 2-0 in front of their home fans.

"The Old Lady", as the club is known in Italy, was not amused.

Fiorentina, owned by TV and movie mogul Vittorio Cecchi Gori, will once again put their faith in skipper and top goalscorer Gabriel Batistuta, as they have done for each of the last eight years.

During that time, all Fiorentina have ever won is the Italian Cup, which here is considered something of a booby prize. Now Batigol has a first-class team around him and a profound desire to finally win big.

Down in Rome, both clubs fancy their chances - Lazio, owned by tomato sauce baron Sergio Cragnotti, because they came so close last time around,



BATISTUTA

and AS Roma because they now have a tough, world-class coach in Fabio Capello, once the much-feared taskmaster at AC Milan.

All seven teams are certainly magnificent on paper. With the possible exception of Lazio, each one has an attacking trident which club chairmen elsewhere in Europe would kill for.

However, only one of them is going to win the "scudetto" and as happened last season - the key will probably not be in the boots, but in the brains of the winning team; which team has the mental strength needed to cope with the intense pressure in the final weeks?

Lazio cracked last season, as did title rivals Parma. AC Milan clung to their old guard of Paolo Maldini, "Bibbi" Costacurta and Demetrio Albertini and weathered the storm, winning the championship on a dramatic final day.

More than ever before, the coming Italian season will be a demanding test of courage, as much as class. And the winner will certainly need to be magnificent at both.

Kazu on way
back home

TOKYO, Aug 24: Kazuyoshi Miura, once ace striker of Japan, said Tuesday he would move to a Kyoto team from Croatia Zagreb, reports AFP.

Miura, whose international fame has waned since he missed the World Cup finals debut of Japan, signed a five-month contract with Kyoto Purple Sanga in the J-League, he told a news conference at a Tokyo hotel.

The 32-year-old striker will appear on a Japanese pitch as early as Saturday.

Miura said he decided to play in Kyoto Purple Sanga because the club's manager, Shu Kamo, "has trusted" him, Jiji Press said.

Kamo said Miura was still energetic and would "stimulate the team," the news agency said.

Miura was dumped from Japan's World Cup squad last year and the Croatian club acquired him from Verdy Kawasaki of Japan in December.

He had been to play with the Croatian champions for 18 months for 360,000 dollars but the team told Miura it had no plans to use him in an upcoming season.

The Kyoto club did not unveil how much it would pay Croatia Zagreb as a transfer fee. Reports here said Miura took Kyoto's offer for an annual salary of some 60 million yen (\$53,700 dollars).

Owen boost
for England

LONDON, Aug 24: Teenage striker Michael Owen on Monday gave England manager Kevin Keegan the news he had been hoping to hear, reports AFP.

The 19-year-old has been out of action for four months, but said he could return for Liverpool in an English Premiership match against Arsenal at Anfield on Saturday.

Owen insists he would be fit for England's make-or-break Euro 2000 qualifiers against Luxembourg and Poland on September 4 and 8.

Liverpool are laying on a special practice game in mid-week to help the teenager back to match fitness.

Owen, who has been out with a hamstring injury since April 12, said: "I have got a game arranged for me at Melwood (Liverpool's training ground) this week behind closed doors. If it goes well then who knows?"

Asked if he was confident of playing against Arsenal and then joining up with the England squad, Owen added: "I don't see why not."

"The manager has said to me if everything goes right for me he sees no problem with me joining up with England." "Hopefully, Kevin Keegan sees it the same way, and if I play against Arsenal then hopefully he will call me up."

Owen insists he has waited until he is absolutely sure his injury has cleared up.

"A lot of people who get hamstring injuries rely a lot on their pace and that's been the case with me," he told Sky Television.

"It is important from my point of view I get it perfect before I join up with the team. I have been doing quite a lot in training and it is all coming back."

Warm farewell
to Ramos

TOKYO, Aug 24: Over 48,000 soccer fans flocked to Tokyo's National Stadium on Monday night to pay tribute to a Brazilian who became a Japanese sports icon, reports Reuters.

The occasion was the farewell match for 42-year-old midfielder Ruy Ramos, who moved to Japan in 1977, became a Japanese citizen in 1989 and went on to play 32 times for his country.

He retired from professional soccer with his club, Verdy Kawasaki, at the end of last year, but took centre stage just one more time, for a Yomiuri All Star team against a J. League XI.

With his long curly hair and beard, spindly legs and Brazilian ball skills, Ramos became a firm favourite for club and country and the focal point of the national team in the early 1990s.

After Monday's game, which the All Stars won 3-1, Ramos thanked the fans for their encouragement during his long career.

"Without your support, I could not have continued playing as long as I did," said Ramos.

"When I first played at this stadium 22 years ago there were 300 or 400 people watching. Tonight it is nearly full, and this shows the progress Japanese football has made in that time."

"Even when my Japanese was not very good, I played with all my heart and soul because I love football. Please remember me this way."

The All Stars - sponsored by Ramos' first club in Japan, the Yomiuri media group - included former national team hero Kazuyoshi Miura and Brazilian striker Careca, who used to play for Japanese club Kashiwa Reysol.

The J League team included France World Cup veterans Masami Ihara, goalkeeper Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi, striker Masashi Nakayama and another Brazilian-turned-Japanese, Wagner Lopes.

Lopes scored the best goal of the night by chesting down a pass on the edge of the area, turning smartly and cracking a right-foot volley into the top corner.

The All Stars' goals came from Hideki Nagai, Takayuki Yamaguchi and Brazilian playmaker Bismarck.



Japanese football star Kazuyoshi Miura (R) shakes the hand of Kyoto Purple Sanga manager Shu Kamo yesterday. —AFP photo

L'pool bounce back

LONDON, Aug 24: Liverpool eased the pressure on their French manager Gerard Houllier with a 2-1 English Premier League victory at Leeds on Monday courtesy of an own goal from home skipper Lucas Radebe, reports Reuters.

Houllier's side had been under the spotlight since before the start of the season after he allowed England players Paul Ince and Steve McManaman to depart and replaced them with foreign signings.

Two 1-0 defeats, by Watford last week and Middlesbrough on Saturday, left his side struggling in 17th place but they thoroughly deserved the three points at Elland Road at the expense of a young Leeds side who were outthought and out-thought.

The win moved Liverpool to ninth in the table. Leeds, who could have joined leaders Manchester United on 10 points remain with seven.

If Houllier's men were nervous beforehand, they showed little sign of it from the kick-off and created a string of early good chances.

However, against the run of play, Leeds went ahead after 20 minutes. A driven corner from Harry Kewell on the right should have been headed in by the unmarked Michael Bridges but the new signing from Sunderland missed it completely.

Instead it cannoned into the net off Rigoberto Song's left ankle under pressure from Darren Huckerby, who is still chasing his first goal for Leeds after moving from Coventry this season.

With seconds of the first half remaining, Liverpool were rewarded for their endeavour with a well-worked equaliser. A quick free-kick midway into the Leeds half found Czech Patrick Berger unmarked.

He exchanged passes with Titi Camara before the ball rebounded from a tackle by Radebe back to the Ghanaian, who curled it perfectly into the top corner with the inside of his right foot.

Liverpool continued where they left off after the break and it was no surprise when they took the lead after 55 minutes with the second own goal of the night.

Another quickly-taken free-

kick caught Leeds napping again and Berger swung in a lethal, swinging centre which Radebe deflected past Nigel Martyn as he tried to fend off Fowler.

The home side never threatened to deprive Liverpool of the points as the visitors' confidence rose visibly throughout the 90 minutes.

English Premiership table after Monday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Man Utd	43	109	210
Tottenham	43	018	59
Middlesbrough	43	017	49
Chelsea	32	107	29
Aston Villa	42	116	37
West Ham	32	105	7
Leeds	52	165	7
Arsenal	42	115	47
Liverpool	42	024	46
Watford	42	024	6
Southampton	42	026	6
Wimbledon	41	129	5
Coventry	41	123	4
Bradford	31	122	4
Everton	41	127	4
Leicester	41	126	4
Sunderland	41	126	4
Newcastle	40	136	11
Derby	40	137	1
Sheff Wed	40	139	1

All is not well at Milan

MILAN, Aug 24: A row is brewing at Italian champions AC Milan, with coach Alberto Zaccheroni sending his critical chairman Silvio Berlusconi a message on Tuesday to leave the coaching to him, reports AFP.

The trouble started last weekend when Milan lost the Italian Super Cup to Parma and Berlusconi put the blame squarely on Zaccheroni's decision to use a three-man attack, instead of a playmaker behind two strikers.

But the coach, who was preparing for Tuesday night's friendly against Real Madrid, told the TV tycoon and former prime minister in no uncertain terms that he knew what he was doing.

"I don't like being identified with a set system of play," he said. "I've always changed things around. And I've done it after winning things, not after losing them."

The players on the best form get to play: that's how I've been doing things for the past 18 years. President Berlusconi can obviously say what he

likes," Zaccheroni said. But he added: "I'm the coach. I know what the job is and I have a lot of respect for it. And I'm going to do things as I see fit."

Zaccheroni's decision last weekend also took into account the absence on international duty of Croatian plamaker

Zvonimir Boban. "Milan played 27 out of 34 matches with a trident last season," Zaccheroni said.

"Boban was in stunning form at the end of the season and we changed our system of play. I've played in lots of different ways and I'll continue to do that."

"Boban can be used in a number of different roles," he told the Gazzetta dello Sport. "The only problem is that the last time I saw him kick a ball was on July 28."

Milan will now have to do without Boban for at least two weeks after he suffered an abdominal muscle injury at the weekend, while skipper Paolo Maldini will be out for three weeks after breaking a toe.

Bruno N'Gotty is likely to replace Maldini on the left in defence, while there are more options up front when the season starts against Lecce on Sunday.

In Madrid, Zaccheroni will be without Oliver Bierhoff, who is being rested, and George Weah, who has been allowed to visit family in New York.

Goalscoring at the Bernabeu will be down to Leonardo, Maurizio Ganz and Andriy Shevchenko.

Sports bodies called for the team to be brought home immediately, but the UAE football federation decided it should carry on under Tony Olivera, Querez's assistant, who is also Portuguese.

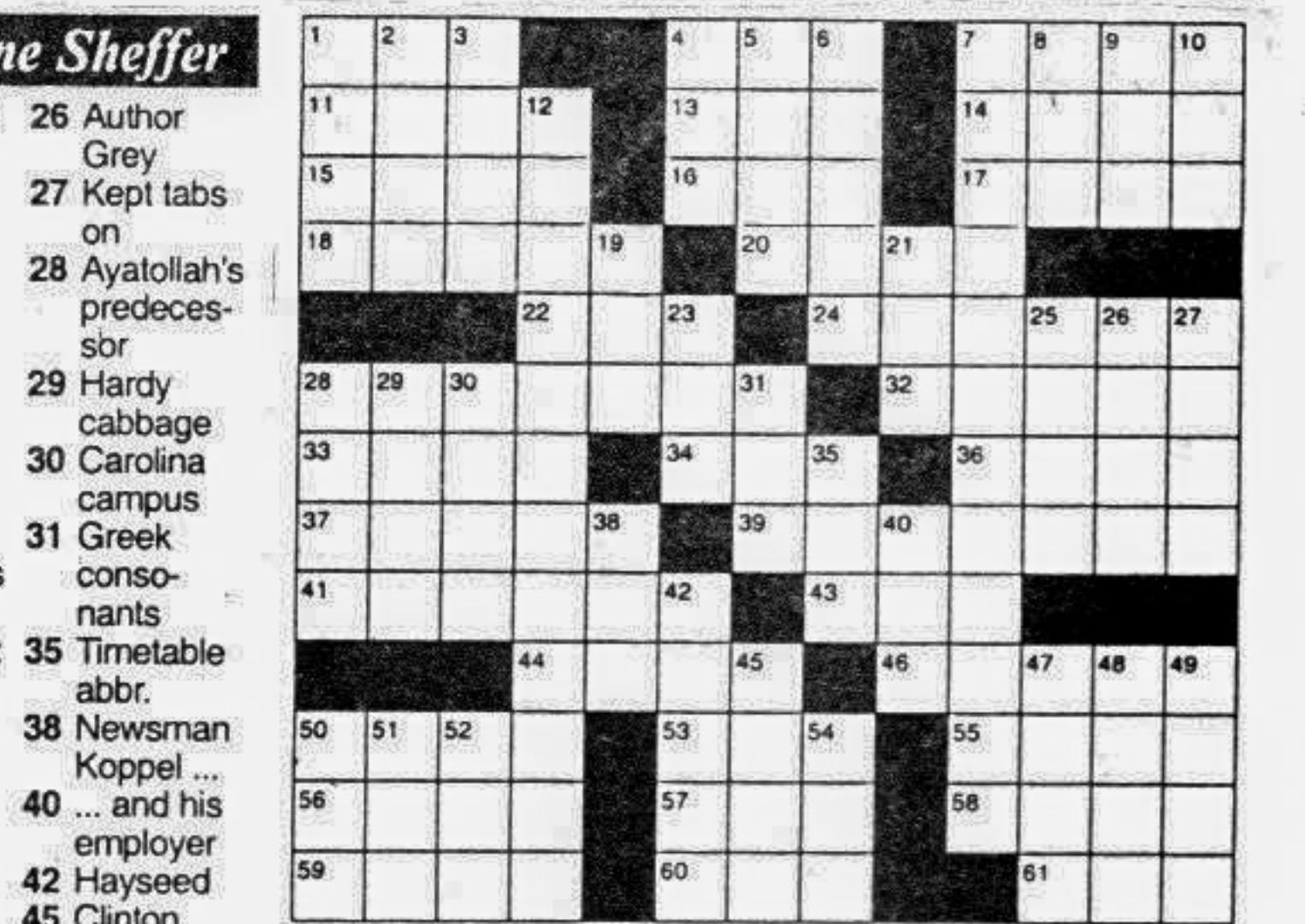


England and Newcastle striker Alan Shearer (L) jokes with his Peruvian teammate Nolberto Solano during practice yesterday. —AFP photo

CROSSWORD

By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	43 Erstwhile serving cager's org.	4 Margarine Lake	26 Author Grey
1 Office-holders	5 A Great	27 Kept tabs on	
4 Shell game	46 Skill	28 Ayatollah's predecessor	
50 Despot	53 Crucial	29 Hardy cabbage	
7 Sabrina	55 Color	30 Carolina campus	
11 Accompanying	56 Dove	31 Greek consonants	
13 Silcom story line	57 Finale	35 Timetable abbr.	
14 1952 Olympics site	58 Swing around	38 Newsman Koppel	
15 Exchange premium	59 Cartoonist's supply	40 ... and his employer	
16 Dead heat	60 — Alamos	42 Hayseed	
17 Cold War initials	61 Citric quaff	45 Clinton Cabinet member	
18 Topiarist's canvas		47 "Clan of the Cave Bear" heroine	
19 History chapters		48 Vendetta	
22 Sample the sherry		49 Christmas emblem	
24 Light current		50 Windy City, briefly	
28 "Gasoline Alley" character		51 Buddhist sect	
32 Variety of eel		52 Early love boat?	
34 Headlight?		54 Gridiron units (Abbr.)	
36 Suitable			
37 High up			
39 In a pile			
41 Regatta setting			



GIVE F UMW WVZA ME RFH

ZQCLRPV, UVQJFUA MZ AJCLPH

HMFP AGMEV CEV CEV

Saturday's Cryptogram: A CHESS PLAYER WILL NORMALLY START HIS STORIES, "ONCE A PAWN AT TIME..."

Today's Cryptogram clue: G equals W

The Cryptogram is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.