With all due respect, how-

"It doesn't really matter at

Agassi is enjoying the best

year of his career. He captured

the No 1 ranking after winning

the French Open and added the

US Open title. He also ended

Sampras' run of six straight

If he wins the ATP champi-

onship, Agassi will repeat his

triumph from 1990, the year the

event came to Germany. After this year's edition, the champi-

onship will be staged in Lisbon,

Portugal and then move to Sao

Second-ranked Kafelnikov.

year-end No 1 rankings.

Paulo, Brazil.

ever. Agassi said he didn't re-

this point. They all present

semifinals.

problems," he said

ally care whom he faced in the

Kaiser hopeful of Oceania's support

AUCKLAND, Nov 26: The chief of the Oceania Football Confederation has reviewed his support for England's 2006 World Cup bid, according to German legend Franz Beckenbauer, reports AFP.

Beckenbauer -- here to drum up support for Germany's 2006 bid during the FIFA under-17 world championships -- said OFC boss Charlie Dempsey would not necessarily back England.

But Beckenbauer said England had "home advantage" in trying to press their case with Dempsey and other Oceania officials.

"Today Charlie Dempsey said he had changed his mind. He is 50-50 now," Beckenbauer said when asked about reports Dempsey had already thrown his backing behind the English. English legend Sir Bobby Charlton also met Dempsey Friday along with South Africa's Danny Jordan.

En route to Tokyo for the preliminary rounds draw of the 2002 World Cup next week, with another German great, Jurgen Klinsmann, Beckenbauer, said: "Winning the right to host the 2006 World Cup is seen as an important step in the reunification of Germany.

"I won everything I could in football but this (the bid) is a real challenge.

Beckenbauer acknowledged South Africa's claims to host the finals. "They (Africa) are the only

the championship. He would not be drawn on a likely bid for 2010 if Germany

major confederation yet to host

missed out at the vote in July next year.

Sofia to stage Spartak-Leeds **UEFA** tie

SOFIA, Nov 26: The UEFA Cup match between Spartak Moscow and English Premiership side Leeds United will now be staged on December 2 in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia, reports AFP.

The rearranged tie will be played at Levski Sofla's Georgi Assparouhov Stadium, which has a 26,000 capacity. Earlier Thursday the match.

due to be played in Moscow, was postponed following a decision by a senior UEFA delegate and Swedish match official Anders

Moscow Dynamo stadium director Oleg Tochelovich said that sub-zero temperatures which reached minus 20 Celsius overnight - had frozen the pitch and stadium staff had failed in their attempts to thaw the playing surface.

The senior UEFA match official had earlier Thursday decided to move the match to another Moscow stadium -Luzhniki - but later reversed the decision after it became apparent that the pitch there was also unplayable.

Strasbourg player apologises

STRASBOURG, Nov 26: Strasbourg skipper Teddy Bertin Thursday apologised for calling a group of his club's fans "Boschs" - a derogatory term for a German - at a training session, reports AFP.

Around 20 retired supporters of the Alsatian French first division club were watching a training session Wednesday when the incident happened. When youth team player Regis Dorn - the only player in the squad born in Alsace - scored twice the fans shouted: "Well done the Alsatian.'

Clearly angry, club captain Bertin retorted at the elderly fans: "Shut your mouths and go home you dirty Boschs." Bosch, which is a derogatory

term for a German, is considered very insulting in Alsace which frequently has been annexed by Germany in its history and was only returned to French sovereignty in 1945 at the end of the Second World

On Thursday Bertin with his club manager Claude Leroy present as an arbitrator apologised for his outburst, saying: "I regret and am sorry for what happened yesterday. What I said in a moment of anger was thoughtless. It was particularly stupid of me as in my family there is a branch with German blood in their veins."

India to bid to host 2006 Asian Games

NEW DELHI. Nov 26: India has thrown down a challenge to Hong Kong and Malaysia by announcing it will bid to host the 2006 Asian Games in Bombay, reports AFP.

Indian Olympic Association president Suresh Kalmadi told the general assembly meeting of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) in Kuwait on Monday that he was confident India's bid will be accepted.

An IOA spokesman here quoted Kalmadi as saying the response from OCA President Sheikh Ahmad was positive.

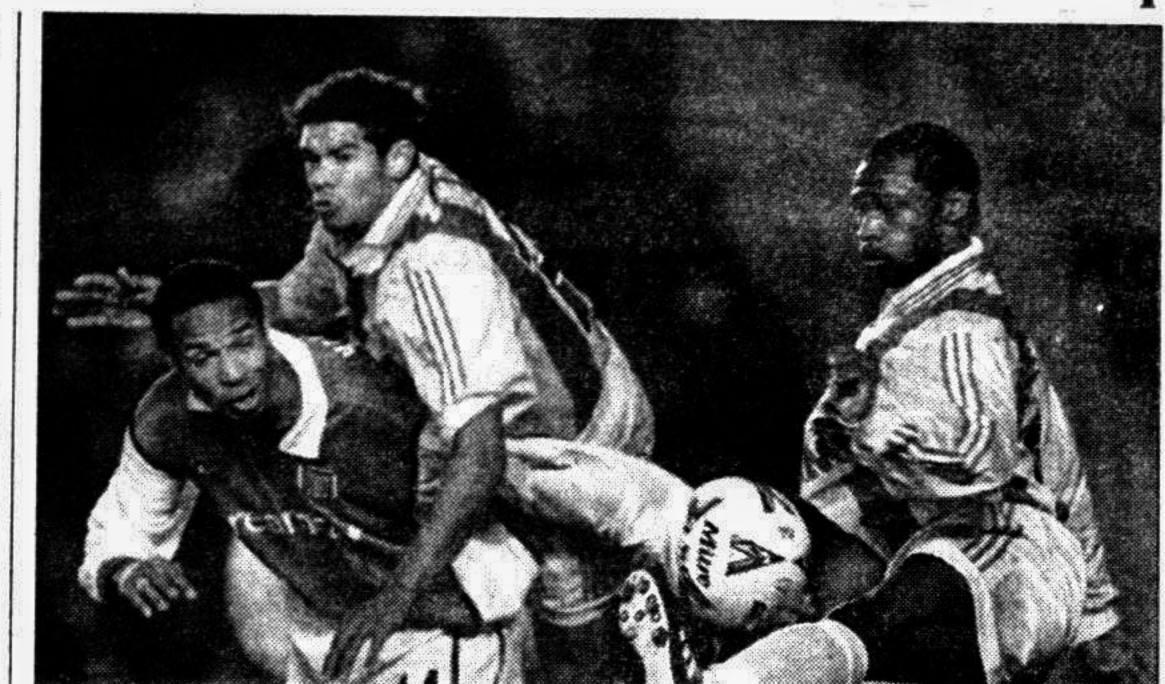
"The Sheikh sounded optimistic during my meeting with him and I am sure OCA will support our bid," Kalmadi told the spokesman over phone from Kuwait.

The Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong are the other strong contenders for the 2006 Asiad.

The host city will be chosen at the next OCA meeting in Sydney during the summer Olympics in September, 2000. India, who twice hosted the Asian Games at New Delhi in 1951 and 1982, have chosen the

financial capital of Bombay

this time as the venue.



Arsenal's French international striker Thierry Henry (L) being challenged by two Nantes defenders. - AFP photo

Serie A preview

Top guns face to face



Italy is bracing for a clash of the titans this weekend when joint Lazio and Juventus do battle at the Olympic stadium, reports

The two sides have both rattled up 21 points after losing just one of their 10 games so far. Now they meet in Rome on Sunday night for a match which is worth far more than

three points in the league table. Victory for Lazio would do much for the confidence that was shattered by last weekend's humiliating 4-1 derby drubbing by AS Roma, and then partially re-built by their 2-0 midweek win over Marseille. Lazio president Sergio

Cragnotti said bravely: "I think the criticism did us good ... we knew that we'd got the derby all "But we put it all behind us.

We did well (against Marseille) and now we'll try to do the same against Juventus."

Lazio, unbeaten in all competition this season before last weekend's defeat, will be looking to Chilean Marcelo "The Matador" Salas to supply the goals, supported by either Croatian Alen Boksic or Simone Inzaghi.

But the psychological stakes are high too for Juventus The Turin club, already on a roll after beating reigning champions AC Milan 3-1 last

Sunday night, will be unstop-

beating a side rated as one of the best in the world.

Team morale got an added boost from trouncing Olympiakos 3-1 in the UEFA Cup third round in midweek and team coach Carlo Ancelotti will be counting on a continuing return to form of his strike trio of Alessandro Del Piero,

The price for spitting

ROME, Nov 26: AS Roma's Brazilian defender Antonio Zago has been banned for three games after he spat at Lazio's Diego Simeone during Sunday's Rome derby, reports Reuters.

The incident, not seen by the referee, was caught by television cameras. Zago became the fourth player this season to be suspended with the use of video evidence.

Zago said he had been provoked by Argentine midfielder Simeone but the head of Italy's court of sport, Maurizio Laudi, said that while there was evidence of verbal abuse from Simeone it was no excuse for spitting. "Spitting is an act of vio-

lence, a form of aggression which is damaging on a psychological and moral level and which humiliates the opponent," said Laudi.

Zago will miss Roma's away games at Udinese and Bologna and a home fixture with Lecce.

MILAN, Nov 26: pable if they can top that by Filippo Inzaghi and World Cup winner Zinedine Zidane.

AC Milan face an aweseome task in trying to interrupt Parma's month-long winning run, a task made even more difficult after their bruising defeat to Juventus last weekend.

The only good news is that Ukrainian Andriv Shevchenko, the Serie A's top scorer with seven goals, should start after missing the game in

Neighbours Inter Milan, who gave Lecce six of the best here last weekend, now travel south to face newly-promomoted Reggina. Inter will be without Ronaldo, but hopes are high that the world's most expensive footballer ever, 50-million-dollar Christian Vieri, will return from a foot injury.

Roma, just two points behind the league leaders, flushed from the derby and comforted by a narrow 1-0 home win over Newcastle, are away to Udinese.

Giovanni Trapattoni's Fiorentina, midweek conquerors of Manchester United in the European Champions League, travel to Bologna on Saturday. Serie A fixtures (1400 GMT

unless stated) Saturday: Piacenza v Verona, Bologna v Fiorentina

(1930 GMT) Sunday: Cagliari v Bari, Lecce v Venezia, AC Milan v Parma, Reggina v Inter Milan, Torino v Perugia, Udinese v AS Roma, Lazio v Juventus (1930 Hossain v nile (ellin iv

Bundesliga preview

Derby time in Munich



COLOGNE, Germany, Nov 26: 1860 Munich and their more powerful city cousins Munich

Bayern will duel for the 190th time Saturday in their long and passionate rivalry but 1860 coach Werner Lorant will most likely be watching from the sidelines, reports AFP.

Lorant, who missed last year's Munich derby as well because of suspension, has applied to the German Football Federation (DFB) to overturn his two game banishment for insulting a linesman.

The hearing will take place Friday but, in light of the DFB's campaign to give the game a clean image, has only a token chance of success.

A repeat of last week's form when Lorant - confined to the stands - watched his side get bowled over by bottom side Duisburg would be disastrous

against Bayern whose tails are up after a 6-1 win at Freiburg and their strong Champions League showing Wednesday (1-1) at Norway's Rosenborg Trondheim.

win here (in Trondheim) and then get a victory at home over (Dynamo) Kyiv to go into the winter break with six points but the important thing is the way we played," Bayern manager Uli Honess said.

"I have to say that after the game in Freiburg and now this one that our confidence has grown enormously. I hope we have found our rhythm now so we can play a series of good matches.

A second derby, at the opposite end of the country, is that of Werder Bremen and Hamburg. After being branded a failure Brazilian striker Ailton, Bremen's most expensive player import, hit the net twice against Frankfurt last weekend and



Palmeiras' former Brazilian international Zinho (L) poses with teammate Paulo Nunes during a practice session in Yokohama yesterday. Palmeiras take on Manchester United on Tuesday for the World Club Championship title - AFP photo

seems to have found his legs after 13 months on the fringes. Hamburg however must do without their captain Martin Groth until next year because of

mysterious grow adjust which "It would have been great to has doctors puzzied. A further drain might be the loss of striker Tony Yeboah. He is considering a move to the US in the next few weeks to play for the New York/New Jersey MetroStars, the same club Bayern's Lothar Matthaeus will join next year once the confu-

sion surrounding his contract is settled. Hertha Berlin travel to Wolfsburg Saturday but for now are preoccupied with how to compensate their fans who saw virtually nothing of this week's European game against Barcelona because of pea soup fog. The mist was so thick UEFA even considering calling

off the game. To Hertha's good fortune play carried on and they escaped with a 1-1 draw, marked by a tenacious performance which restored confidence amid a string of poor Bundesliga results. Wolfsburg however had no lucky escape against Atletico Madrid in the UEFA Cup and lost 2-3 at home.

"The football Atletico played was the best I have seen for a long time," Wolves' manager Peter Pander praised. "I'm starting to get doubts when I hear the Bundesliga is the best football league in the world."

Injury returnee Michael Ballack gave Bayer Leverkusen their first three pointer in seven games this week, a 1-0 Italian club Udinese Calcio, and lifted spirits ahead of Friday's game at Arminia Bielefeld. Leverkusen have slipped noticeably since being knocked out of the Champions League and are wanting fresh motivation.

"I hope this win will give us that spark we need to push us forward in the Bundesliga," Leverkusen's German international Jens Nowotny said. "We need three points in Bielefeld if we are to keep in touch with Bayern and Hamburg."

Kaiserslautern continue to bask in the regal shadow of French World champion Youri Djorkaeff who has been hailed a godsend since arriving in the Palatinate this season. In less than a dozen games

he has elevated himself to hero status and will be expected to weave more midfield magic Sunday at Frankfurt. Mario Basler is still await-

ing his first game for Kaiserslautern since signing on 10 days ago and may be named on the bench for a few minutes near the end to test his injured knee. The remaining games in

round 13 of the Bundesliga are:

SSV Ulm v Schalke (Friday);

Freiburg v VfB Stuttgart, Hansa

Rostock v Unterhaching, and

Borussia Dortmund v Duisburg.

TEL AVIV. Nov 26: The Israeli Football Federation has Thursday cleared players in the national team of allegations that they spent the eve of their European Championship play-off decider with Denmark in the company of call girls, reports

There is no proof that allows for such an application to be laid," said federation president Gabry Levy in a press conference here Thursday.

"The interim inquiry could not establish until now that the accusation was well founded and for us the affair is closed," he continued.

Levy said that two private detective firms charged with investigating the matter had rejected testimonies of call girls implicating the players. The investigators said that the girls had been in different rooms to those occupied by the Israeli

Israeli Minister of Sports and Culture Matan Vilnai, hoever, cast doubt on the findings of the federation, implying they were covering up on behalf of the players.

"I am all the more surprised at the conclusions of the federation since none of the players accepted to submit themselves to a lie detector test," Vilnai told national radio.

Revelations of the alleged nocturnal activities of the footballers caused a huge outcry. Israel lost the first leg 5-0 to Denmark and were beaten in the return in Copenhagen 3-0, therefore being eliminated from Euro 2000.

Keane keen to stay with MU

MANCHESTER, England, Nov 26: Roy Keane hinted on Thursday he would sign a new long-term contract with European champions Manchester United despite being free to accept offers from abroad next northern summer, reports Reuters. United skipper Keane told

Greater Manchester Radio: "There's a meeting scheduled next week between the club and my solicitor, so hopefully I will have some positive news then. "The talks are still at a deli-

cate stage but, fingers crossed, I will have something positive to Italian Serie A sides Lazio

and Juventus as well as Spain's Real Madrid were all rumoured to be interested in signing the Ireland midfielder whose current deal runs out in June. Keane made a statement ear-

lier this season claiming he would wait until next summer before deciding on his future. However, after pressure from United to begin negotiations on a new contract, Keane now seems ready to re-sign for the

Old Trafford team. United are desperate to keep Keane and If a deal is not reached he could walk away from Old Trafford next summer without the club receiving a fee.

At their annual meeting last week, United chairman Sir Roland Smith claimed the club would do everything in its power to hold on to their cap-

Merson vows to bounce back

LONDON, Nov 26: Former England striker Paul Merson has overcome drink, drugs and gambling problems off the pitch and has vowed to bounce back from what he calls his "lowest point in football", reports Reuters.

The Aston Villa player rekindled his strike partnership with fellow former England striker and Villa Park outcast Stan Collymore on Wednesday when they lined up to play against a team of Loughborough University stu-

The playing field scattered with a handful of spectators was a far cry from the packed stadiums the pair are used to performing in but neither player complained.

want to play football...it's what I love doing and I'm not going to get a game any other way," Merson said.

"I wasn't made to play -asked to play, I want to play football and I'm not going to get in the first team." After an emotional confession to problems with gambling, alcohol and cocaine in 1994, Merson entered a rehabilitation clinic and looked to have conquered his demons.

A very public relapse followed but now Merson is determined to bounce back. "I think it just shows how

much I have come on in the last six or seven months because someone asked me at a meeting yesterday 'what is your highest point and lowest point?... well, this is my lowest point in football and I'm okay," he said. Collymore, once Britain's most expensive footballer when

pounds (13.73 million dollars) for him, spent a spell in a rehabilitation centre earlier this year to receive treatment for depression. The striker spent the final four months of last season receiving counselling and has

Liverpool paid 8.5 million

Villa Park by manager John Gregory. Gregory has said that Collymore will never play for him again and the player was sent on loan to Fulham earlier

this season.

found himself frozen out at

Nothing permanent came of that deal. This month Collymore refused to go on loan to former club Nottingham Forest, insisting instead that he wanted to stay and play for Villa. "I don't think it takes a

rocket scientist to guess I'm not

happy with the situation, think I should be in the (first team) squad at least," he said. "But I'm good, in good spirits and whatever happens I'll keep plugging away."

Israeli booters | Agassi just too good let off the hook | Agassi just too good



HANOVER, Germany, Nov 26 (AP): Andre Agassi already has the trophy. All he has to do now is win the tournament. The way he's playing, that could be a

formality. After beating Gustavo Kuerten 6-4, 7-5 in his last round-robin match Thursday at the ATP Tour World Championship, Agassi received the ATP trophy presented to the player who finishes the year as No 1 in the world.

"It symbolises a lot for me professionally and personally," Agassi said after receiving the glass trophy which depicts an athlete holding up his index finger in a No 1 sign. "It's a big accomplishment

for me." Even in the unlikely case that Agassi falters and fails to win the season-ending event, he is assured of finishing the year as No 1.

The American has not

first three matches and became the first player to advance to the semifinals.

dropped a set in sweeping his

The 3.6-million dollar tournament brings together the top

eight players in the world, who are split into two groups. The top two from each pool advance to the last four.

Agassi is sure of winning his Red Group. Kuerten, a Brazilian ranked No 3 in the world, is 1-2, and theoretically still in the running.

The group will be decided Friday, when Pete Sampras, 1-1. plays Nicolas Lapentti of Ecuador, who is 0-2. Under the complicated tie-breaking formula, Sampras needs to win just a set to advance.

The White Group also will be decided Friday, when Thomas Enqvist (1-1) plays Todd Martin (0-2) and Nicolas Kiefer (1-1) battles Yevgeny Kafelnikov (2-

Kuerten was the first man to break Agassi's serve in the tournament and fired 13 aces. But even that wasn't enough to match Agassi's powerful and precise ground shots.

Despite his impressive performances. Agassi said he did not feel unbeatable. "It's the exact opposite.

That's what keep firing me, the respect for other players." "It's easy to have an off day and that's all it takes. There's

some good tennis out there," he

who overcame 18 aces by No 4 Enqvist. won 7-5, 3-6, 6-4. Kafelnikov also beat Enqvist in the final of this year's Australian Open. Kiefer, the sixth-ranked German, delighted the home crowd by defeating Martin 6-3.

6-2. Martin, the US Open finalist who is No 7 in the world, will be looking for a face-saving victory Friday against Enqvist.

No blood-test at 20th London Marathon

LONDON, Nov26: Blood testing will not be introduced in time for next year's 20th anniversary London Marathon. reports AFP. Reports had suggested that

blood tests, which are more accurate than existing anti-coping measures, would be mandatory for entrants in the April However organisers con-

firmed on Tuesday there were no plans to introduce blood testing until the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) have ratified such procedures. "The London Marathon supports moves by the Association

of International Marathons for the introduction of blood-testing,' said race director David "However, we cannot suddenly do this unilaterally. To my knowledge there is no test in

place that we could possibly use

for next year's race. "Once a test is in place, which has been ratified by the IAAF and adopted by other big city marathons, then it will be in place in London.

Blood testing will detect erythropoietin (EPO), a drug used to boost the count of oxygen-carrying red blood cells which can dramatically improve an athletes' stamina.

Meanwhile world record holder Khalid Khannouchi has promised to set an electric pace at next year's Marathon.

The Moroccan smashed Brazilian Ronaldo da Costa's world best in Chicago last month, becoming the first runner to ever dip below two hours and six minutes over the 26.2mile distance.

He arrived in the capital this week for a whistle-stop visit to check out the course in preparation for next April's race.

"Having travelled round the course by car I'm very confident it will be a fast and interesting race," he said.

"It is always difficult to predict the outcome of a race and much depends on the weather conditions and quality of the pace-making. However, I think fast times are a real possibil-

Joining Khannouchi in one of the strongest-ever marathon fields is South Africa's Gert Thys, who last year became the first man ever to run three marathons sub-two hours eight minutes.

Razvan sets new snatch record

ATHENS, Nov 26: Romania's Ilie Razvan broke the world record for snatch in the men's 77 kg category at the World Weightlifting Championships on Thursday, reports Reuters.

He lifted 170 kg to better Armenia's Khachatur Kya-

16 Puerto Rican export safeguard 20 Piz Bernina, 21 22 21 Incinerate 22 Inconsiderate 23 Diving 27 Cribbage show loot 29 Ruffian 30 Periodic 46 47 48 table fig. 31 Curd's mate 33 Chills out 35 Single no more 38 Sashimi **CRYPTOQUIP** 40 Lascivious 43 Mausolea

46 Rebuff to L D N B NMLLRI AGMW: GMXM JZOBC! ADQR

> A NUMBER OF CORN FARMERS WERE CONCERNED ABOUT THE STALK MARKET. Today's Cryptoquip clue: Z equals I

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the

jury. Cesar said he would wait pakaktsyan's 168.5 kg, lifted on until before the game before April 16, 1999 in La Coruna, making a decision on him. Spain.

CXAYRE

RXC, EIZJY XJE WR QXMZ! Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WE'RE TOLD THAT

puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.



NUMERO UNO: American Andre Agassi shows off his trophy after finishing the year as world's best tennis player at the ATP championship on November 25. - AFP photo

FIFA world under-17 championship final

"But they know now that

"We've got a few surprises for

Meanwhile Ghana will go

they have an opportunity to

snatch glory by beating the best

them, courtesy of Australia and

Oceania, the spirit here down-

into Saturday's third and

fourth playoffs against the

United States without Lawrence

Kainya who was suspended for

two matches after being sent off

against Uruguay in the quarter-

ceived two yellow cards in the

playoff rounds, will also miss

the game as will US defender

Seth Trembley, who was sent

off in the semifinal against

Brazil is over left back

Anderson, who didn't train

Friday because of a left foot in-

The major concern for

Michael Essien, who re-

under is stronger than anything

in the business.

they can produce."

final.

Australia.

Coaches exuding confidence AUCKLAND, Nov field after the 2-1 loss in 26 Brazil coach Christchurch (against Brazil) Carlos Cesar goafeeling they had let themselves down.

ded his Australian opponents in Saturday's world under-17 final by declaring his team have already played their

toughest game, reports AFP. Cesar predicted his team would play better than they have done so far this tourna-"I believe my players can win tomorrow because, I think,

we've already played our tough-

est game in the tournament against Ghana. "Technically and tactically we were a better team than Ghana, but I didn't know if we could handle their physical ap-

blunt terms.

ACROSS

13 Hold the

scepter

brand

37 "Xena"

co-star

proach. As it turned out it wasn't a problem for us," Cesar Australian coach Les Scheinflug retorted in equally

they've played their toughest game in the tournament then that is good, just as long as they believe it," he said.

"If the Brazilians think

"We're not frightened of Brazil, we've played them before and the players came off the

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

41 "A Chorus 60 Crystal-

1 Service-Line" song 42 Say it's 61 Trapezist's woman 4 Suppliokay cate 44 Arrange DOWN 8 Garage strate-1 Moo goo goings-on 12 Future 46 A flier

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billet-doux Solution time: 27 mins. 26 Dine 28 "Phooey!" 32 "Paradise Lost" character 34 Garden venue of England 36 Erstwhile

TODAYSNOW REB VOTED SHORTLINE AXE PERU ODOR RAN O'Connor 39 Hair gunk Yesterday's answer

E C R U E S A U S H O R T C A K E

lier's stuff

2 Broad st.

3 Sweater

hairpiece

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4 Game

6 Poetic

plaint

7 Busy-

body

9 Ram-

8 Insulting

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45 Upsilon

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47 Somme-

wordplay

5 Bad

49 Stratagem 53 Prompt 54 "Modern Fables" author 55 "Wayne's World" interjection