

Scottish Premiership

Easy outing await Rangers

GLASGOW, Dec 3: Reigning Scottish champions Rangers have the chance to stretch their commanding lead at the top of the Scottish Premier League when they travel to struggling St Johnstone on Saturday, reports AFP.

Dick Advocaat's side are currently four points clear of Celtic and they also hold a game in hand over their arch rivals from the other side of Glasgow.

Advocaat, however, has serious injury problems in attack.

Finnish international striker Jonatan Johansson was taken to hospital after damaging his ankle in Wednesday's surprise 1-0 defeat by Aberdeen in the League Cup.

He joins a casualty list which already includes Rod Wallace, Gabriel Amato and Michael Mols.

Rangers' striking problems were all too obvious against Aberdeen who are currently propping up the table with just one league win all season.

"It is a difficult time," says Advocaat. "I said it before that we have to play so many games and we have to win games which isn't always possible."

"We have a lot of injured players but I hope we can get Wallace and Amato fit and back."

Celtic, criticised by their own players this week for selling Scotland international Craig Burley to Derby, are at home to fifth-placed Hibernian.

The mounting pressure on head coach John Barnes, which has intensified since Burley's departure, has started to affect morale in the Celtic dressing-room - according to the players.

Defender Alan Stubbs said: "I think it's obvious to everyone that all the bad publicity is affecting us. Anyone who says the players aren't suffering at the moment is a liar."

There has been a lot of bad press and everything which has gone on has not done us any favours and has been eating away at our confidence. We know we haven't played well recently but hopefully that can change."

Fixtures (matches kick off 1500):

Saturday: Aberdeen v Motherwell, Celtic v Hibernian, Dundee v Kilmarnock, St Johnstone v Rangers

Sunday: Hearts v Dundee Utd (k/o 1805)

Italian Cup

Milan stunned by Atalanta

ROME, Dec 3 (Reuters/Internet): Italian champions AC Milan surrendered a two-goal lead to crash to a shock 2-2 defeat by Serie B side Atalanta in a Italian Cup third round, first leg game on Thursday.

Milan took the lead in the 14th minute through Ukrainian international Andriy Shevchenko but never looked comfortable against a determined side that lie third in Serie B.

Milan goalkeeper Sebastiano Rossi was forced to make a series of saves after the break as Atalanta piled on the pressure, but against the run of play, Leonardo added a second for Milan after good work from George Weah.

Atalanta's remarkable comeback began 20 minutes from time when Nicola Caccia pulled a goal back. Striker Marco Nappi equalised in the 87th minute and grabbed the dramatic winner a minute into injury time.

It was the second good result for Serie B sides in the Cup following Ravenna's 1-1 draw at home to title favourites Lazio on Wednesday.

The other remaining Serie B side in the last 16, Napoli, lost 3-1 at home to Juventus on Wednesday.

The second leg games will be played between Dec 14-16.

Keane to sit with MU officials

MANCHESTER, England, Dec 3: Manchester United captain Roy Keane will sit down with club officials next week in a fresh bid to break the deadlock in his contract negotiations, reports AFP.

Talks on Wednesday failed to find a breakthrough and both sides have agreed to continue their discussions on Tuesday.

Keane's lawyer, Michael Kennedy, said: "There's a meeting arranged for next week and we hope we will be able to carry on our discussions at that meeting."

So far Keane, whose contract with the European and English champions expires at the end of the season, has rejected United's offers and time is quickly running out if United are to persuade him to sign a new deal.

From January 1 the Republic of Ireland midfielder will be free to talk to other clubs and sign a pre-contract agreement.

Italian giants Juventus and Inter Milan, both of whom are reported to be interested in signing the 28-year-old, can officially join the bidding and they will be able to offer much more money than United.

Keane maintains that he wants the best deal he can get, prompting fears at United that he will leave for abroad on a free transfer under the Bosman ruling.

The Republic of Ireland midfielder arrived back in Manchester on Wednesday night after scoring the winning goal in the Inter-Continental cup victory over Palmeiras in Tokyo.

Bundesliga preview

Bayern-Borussia match of the day



BERLIN, Dec 3 (Reuters/Internet): Troubled Borussia Dortmund will be eager to restore some pride when they visit rivals Bayern Munich in the highlight of the German First Division weekend programme on Saturday (1900 GMT).

The times when Dortmund contested Bayern's supremacy seem a long time ago to the 1997 European Cup winners, who have now had nine matches without a win.

They lost 1-0 to lowly Unterhaching on Wednesday to remain a modest fifth in the 18-strong league.

Not since the 1990-91 season had the once-mighty Ruhr Valley outfit experienced such a poor run and, to make matters worse, the atmosphere is particularly tense at the club.

Coach Michael Skibbe, clearly under pressure, fined Heiko Herrlich this week after the striker complained about being left on the bench.

Two other Dortmund players, midfielder Andy Moeller and Nigerian striker Victor Ikpeba, had been fined for criticising their coach earlier this season.

Bayern, by contrast, are doing quite well. Last season's European Cup finalists, still in contention in the Champions

League, top the Bundesliga standings and cruised through to the quarter-finals of the German Cup with a 3-0 win over Second Division Waldhof Mannheim on Wednesday.

Bayern trainer Ottmar Hitzfeld, who coached Dortmund to their 1997 European triumph, does have a few worries like the absence of Brazilian striker Elber and French defender Bixente Lizarazu, both injured.

The German champions will also be without playmaker Stefan Effenberg, who is suspended.

Other matches this weekend (league positions in brackets, kickoff times GMT):

SATURDAY, ALL 1430
HERTHA BERLIN (14) V SSV ULM (17)

Herta have been struggling lately, most recently on Tuesday when they were knocked out of the German Cup by Second Division FSV Mainz.

Lowly Ulm are chasing their first away win since joining the top flight for the first time this season.

SCHALKE 04 (9) V SC FREIBURG (12)

Only once, in the 1995-96 season, have Schalke won at home to SC Freiburg. The Gelsenkirchen club cannot rely on libero and captain Olaf Thon, fighting a bout of influenza.

VFB STUTTGART (8) V TSV 1860 MUNICH (7)

VfB Stuttgart should welcome back Bulgarian playmaker Krassimir Balakov to entertain TSV 1860 Munich, whose coach Werner Lorant will be standing by their bench again after being suspended for two matches for insulting an assistant referee.

BAYER LEVERKUSEN (2) V WERDER BREMEN (4)

Title-chasing Bayer Leverkusen are at full strength to host Werder Bremen, whose Yugoslav striker Rade Bogdanovic is still sidelined by injury.

SUNDAY, BOTH 1630
SPVGG UNTERHACHING (13) V ARMINIA BIELEFELD (16)

Modest Unterhaching boosted their morale with a 1-0 win over Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday. Strugglers Bielefeld are without several key players through injury.

KAISERSLAUTERN (6) V VfL WOLFSBURG (11)

Kaiserslautern have been going strong lately but their libero and captain Ciriaco Sforza is a doubtful starter because of a knee injury. VfL Wolfsburg will miss two important players in Denmark defender Claus Thomsen, who is suspended, and Nigerian striker Jonathan Akpoborie, recovering from knee surgery.

WNSL vow to prove govt. wrong

LONDON, Dec 3: Officials at Wembley said on Thursday they will make a rapid response to a government report which criticised their proposals for a new stadium and show critics their proposed scheme does accommodate athletics, reports AFP.

Wembley National Stadium Ltd (WNSL) insisted the report into their stadium contained a number of factual inaccuracies, misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Olympic requirements.

The British Government has ordered designers of the new 475-million-pound (725-million-dollar) stadium - the centrepiece of England's bid to host the 2006 World Cup - to present a new blueprint for the arena within two weeks.

British Minister of Culture, Media and Sport Chris Smith claimed on Wednesday that the current design would make it impossible for the legendary venue to stage the Olympic Games.

Architect Lord Foster's design does not include plans for a permanent athletics track, but allows for the arena to be converted to athletics by inserting a track for major events like the Olympics or World Championships.

In a statement on Thursday Wembley officials claimed their current proposals already cater for athletics usage.

WNSL said: "We are confident that once the shortcomings of the Ellerbe Beckett analysis (the government report) are made clear... it will become apparent that the Wembley proposal is suitable for athletics usage."

Ardiles to join J-League

TOKYO, Dec 3: Argentine Osvaldo Ardiles will return to Japan as the new coach of Yokohama F Marinos, the club said today, reports Reuters.

Ardiles, 48, who was sacked as coach of Croatia Zagreb after their elimination at the end of the first phase of the Champions League, will take up his new post after the end of the Emperor's Cup final, and is not being renewed.

Earlier this week Ardiles strongly hinted he would be returning to Japan where he was last in charge of Shimizu S-Pulse, now coached by his former deputy and also former Tottenham Hotspur teammate Steve Perryman.

McEnroe calls for changes

LONDON, Dec 3 (Reuters): He may be the new US Davis Cup captain, but John McEnroe has no intention of mellowing - on court or off.

Life at 40 suits the former scourge of umpires and the Senior Tour is his new stomping ground.

This week McEnroe dispatched old foe Bjorn Borg in a replay of many a final of 20 years ago before going on to tell tennis chiefs to get the game in order.

"I know in my heart if I play well I should beat any of these guys," McEnroe said after his 7-5, 6-4 win on the first day of a senior tournament at London's Albert Hall.

"It doesn't matter who it is. If they think they can come out and beat me, they've got another thing coming."

The New Yorker showed the sport's decision-makers even less mercy: "They've not gone far enough," he said of the changes to the ranking system.

"I wish they did. I'm an idealist. I wish they had someone who had the guts to really make the changes."

Clearly there's things that need to be changed... the scheduling of the Davis Cup; what to do with the Olympics; doubles in general; the amount of tournaments on the schedule; a real calendar. All these things have not been addressed," McEnroe said.

"It's critical for the players to take charge and get back in the public eye. The most critical thing to me is to make the game accessible to the average person. It's still considered a rich game. It's not affordable enough," the seven-time Grand Slam champion said.

Asked whether today's tennis stars needed guidelines to make them more entertaining, McEnroe said: "There shouldn't have to be a code. (Tennis) should be something that they feel proud of."

"Maybe a little kick in the ... might not be a bad idea, though," he added with a smirk.

A glint appeared in McEnroe's eyes when asked about his showdown with old adversary Jimmy Connors on Friday.

"I'm happy Jimmy's here, he pumps me up... I hope he plays well because it lifts my game. There's no substitute for playing Borg or Connors when they're playing the best."

"If you had to pick the guy who hits the ball cleanly then probably Jimmy is the oldest guy out there."

Forty-seven year old Connors beat John Lloyd in straight sets on Thursday.

"Even if it doesn't look like I'm enjoying myself sometimes, I'm enjoying the idea of going out there to compete... it keeps me in condition and beats the hell out of working for a living," McEnroe said.

"But I'd prefer if we had to play three sets (rather than the Senior Tour's two) - it would separate the men from the boys. Give us more of a test."



Cheerful Australian supporters heading towards the Exhibition Palace Stadium in Nice to witness the inaugural day's matches of this year's Davis Cup final against hosts France yesterday.

— AFP photo

Confident Newcombe



Cup final against France this weekend, reports Reuters.

"I woke up this morning with this feeling in my gut that it's our destiny to win," the Australian captain said on Thursday after the draw.

Australia, with 26 victories, are second only to the United States with 31 victories in the overall standings for the men's team tennis event -- and Newcombe is determined to add to that tally.

The three-day final begins on Friday on a specially built clay court in Nice, and nothing happened in Thursday's draw to dent Newcombe's confidence.

Australian first string Mark Philippoussis will open the tie with a match against young Frenchman Sebastien Grosjean, playing his first Davis Cup season, in the first singles on Friday.

Lleyton Hewitt, also a Davis Cup debutant this year, meets French number one Cedric Pioline -- at 13th the highest-ranked player in the tie -- in the second singles.

Newcombe said Philippoussis would surprise on a surface Australians are not traditionally comfortable with.

"Mark is going to surprise some people here and he could be very good at the French Open next year," Newcombe said.

Philippoussis, number one in a team deprived of twice U.S. Open winner Pat Rafter because of injury, has benefited from an unplanned rest following injury himself.

"I feel great. I had an unfortunate injury (during Wimbledon in June) but I feel I've dealt well with that. In the last few years I've felt flat at this stage of the year, but not now," he said.

"I felt the pressure of the

(1998) U.S. Open final against Pat Rafter and I'd like to think I've learnt something about pressure in that match."

Players on both sides said they were itching to get started after long hours of training over several weeks.

Grosjean, beaten by Philippoussis in their only previous meeting on clay at Monte Carlo this year, said he was happy to open the tie as he has done in all his previous ties this campaign.

Newcombe is counting on victory from his doubles pairing of Mark Woodforde and Todd Woodbridge, who have a 13-2 win-loss record in the Davis Cup.

The pair have lost their last two matches to Fabrice Santoro and Olivier Delaite, though, and will have to be in top form on Saturday.

"We would like to erase the memory of losing in 1993," said Woodforde. "It would be exceptionally nice after a disappointing year by our standards."

Australia lost to Germany in the 1993 final in Duesseldorf after the "Woodies" were upset in the doubles by Michael Stich and Patrik Kuchner.

Woodbridge said the pair had worked hard to regain their best form.

"We haven't won (a tournament) since early in the year but we've reached semifinals and finals. If you keep knocking at the door eventually the door will open," he said.

FINAL'S DRAW
Friday's opening singles:
Sebastien Grosjean v Mark Philippoussis

Cedric Pioline v Lleyton Hewitt

Saturday's doubles:
Fabrice Santoro/Olivier Delaite v Mark Woodforde/Todd Woodbridge

Sunday's reverse singles:
Pioline v Philippoussis
Grosjean v Hewitt



Nadia Comaneci and her husband Bart Conner arrive at the Madison Square Garden in New York to attend the Sports Illustrated 20th Century Sports Awards function on December 2.

— AFP photo

Serie A preview

Big guns face tricky targets



MILAN, Dec 3: Italy's three league leaders will be facing the banana skin test this weekend.

with AS Roma, Lazio and Juventus all anxious to avoid any slip-ups against second rate opposition, reports AFP.

All three teams have 22 points from 11 matches and each of them is also doing well in European competition. In theory, they are in for a quiet weekend. But in practice, someone is likely to unstuck.

Fabio Capello's Roma are at home to Lecce after resting two of their three forwards, 23-year-old skipper Francesco Totti and Vincenzo Montella, for their 1-0 midweek Italian Cup defeat to Piacenza.

The cup side featured several reserves, plus Marco Delvecchio, who has scored two goals in each of his last two Serie A games and will be the one to watch on Sunday.

Lazio are away to Perugia on Saturday, thereby giving themselves a three-day break before their European Champions League clash with Gianluca Vialli's Chelsea at the Olympic

stadium.

Like many coaches, Lazio's Sven Goran Eriksson used a Mark II team for Italian Cup duty. The result was a drab 1-1 draw at second division Ravenna for the club who beat newly crowned world champions Manchester United in the European Super Cup.

Juventus, on seemingly unstoppable form at the moment, travel to Bologna. Alessandro Del Piero, rested in midweek, should return alongside Filippo Inzaghi and the ever-improving Zinedine Zidane.

No-one in the top half of the Serie A has a worse attack than Juventus. The 13 goals scored, only two more than bottom club Cagliari, are a testament to an elusive form which Carlo Ancelotti's team only seem to find on cup duty.

However, Bologna goalkeeper Gianluca Pagliuca clearly isn't looking forward to the meeting.

"It is possible to score points in Turin," he claimed. "But it would have been better to have played them a month ago. Now they really are playing well."

The two Milan teams are

lurking two points behind the league leaders, though both are experiencing mixed fortunes.

Inter, who are at home here to Udinese, have finally emerged from a miserable run of form to win each of their last three games between cup and Serie A competition.

However, Ronaldo's season looks pretty much at an end after he underwent surgery in Paris this week. Chilean Ivan Zamorano is in doubt after a groin strain and Christian Vieri is still battling to return from injury.

Vieri, who hasn't played since facing his old club Lazio on October 30, should be partnered up front by rising star Alvaro Recoba.

Serie A fixtures this weekend (1400 GMT unless stated)

Saturday: Juventus v Bologna, Perugia v Lazio (1930 GMT)

Sunday: Bari v Piacenza, Inter Milan v Udinese, Parma v Torino, AS Roma v Lecce, Venezia v Reggina, Verona v Cagliari, Fiorentina v AC Milan (1930 GMT)



Tennis greats Billie Jean King (L) and Martina Navratilova pose during the Sports Illustrated Sports Awards ceremony at the Madison Square Garden.

— AFP photo

World Cup sans Brazil!



UNDATED, Dec 3 (Reuters/ AFP): Brazil's unique record of being the only country to have taken part in the finals of every World Cup is in danger because of allegedly fiddling overage players at an under-17 tournament.

If found guilty, the Brazilian soccer federation, the CBF, could be banned from international soccer for two years, based on punishments handed out by FIFA in similar cases.

The only country to win the World Cup four times, would not be able to compete in the qualifying round of the 2002 World Cup finals. They would also forfeit the right to play at the Sydney Olympics.

In 1988 Mexico was given such a penalty for similar offences.

The CBF president Ricardo Texeira on October 29 demanded sanctions against the three players concerned. All

three falsified their dates of birth in order to compete in competitions eligible for under-17s.

Sandro Hiroshi and Henrique, who play for Sao Paulo, and Bell, who plays for Botafogo are the three players alleged to have submitted false dates of birth.

Hiroshi was a member of the Brazil team that won the under-17 Copa America in Paraguay in 1997 when in fact he was 18.

In 1995 Bell competed at the under-17 World Cup when he too was 18. Henrique almost did the same for this year's under-17 World Cup in New Zealand but was kept at home at the last minute for having "irregular papers".

The CBF is contesting the charge, laying all the blame on the individuals concerned. It claims the trio counterfeited licences, identity papers, passports, birth certificates and other official documents.

They plan to suspend the three players -- possibly for life. Texeira said: "The justice tribunal could end their career because what they did is a crime which may be punished."

The clubs involved also deny any wrongdoing but the country's professional footballers are solid in their support of the trio and are threatening strike action if the three players are suspended.

Former Brazilian international Rai is leading the campaign in support of the trio and is asking for the players to be annulled. Intriguingly Rai said that football chiefs and politicians had not answered for much more serious offences.

FIFA spokesman Keith Cooper told Reuters on Friday: "The facts, as we understand them, are that some overage players appeared for Brazil in an under-17 tournament and FIFA is launching a thorough investigation into the case."

"Let me also say that you are innocent until proven guilty and there are many issues to be resolved. We have been aware of one player -- Sandro Hiroshi -- being involved. There may be others."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

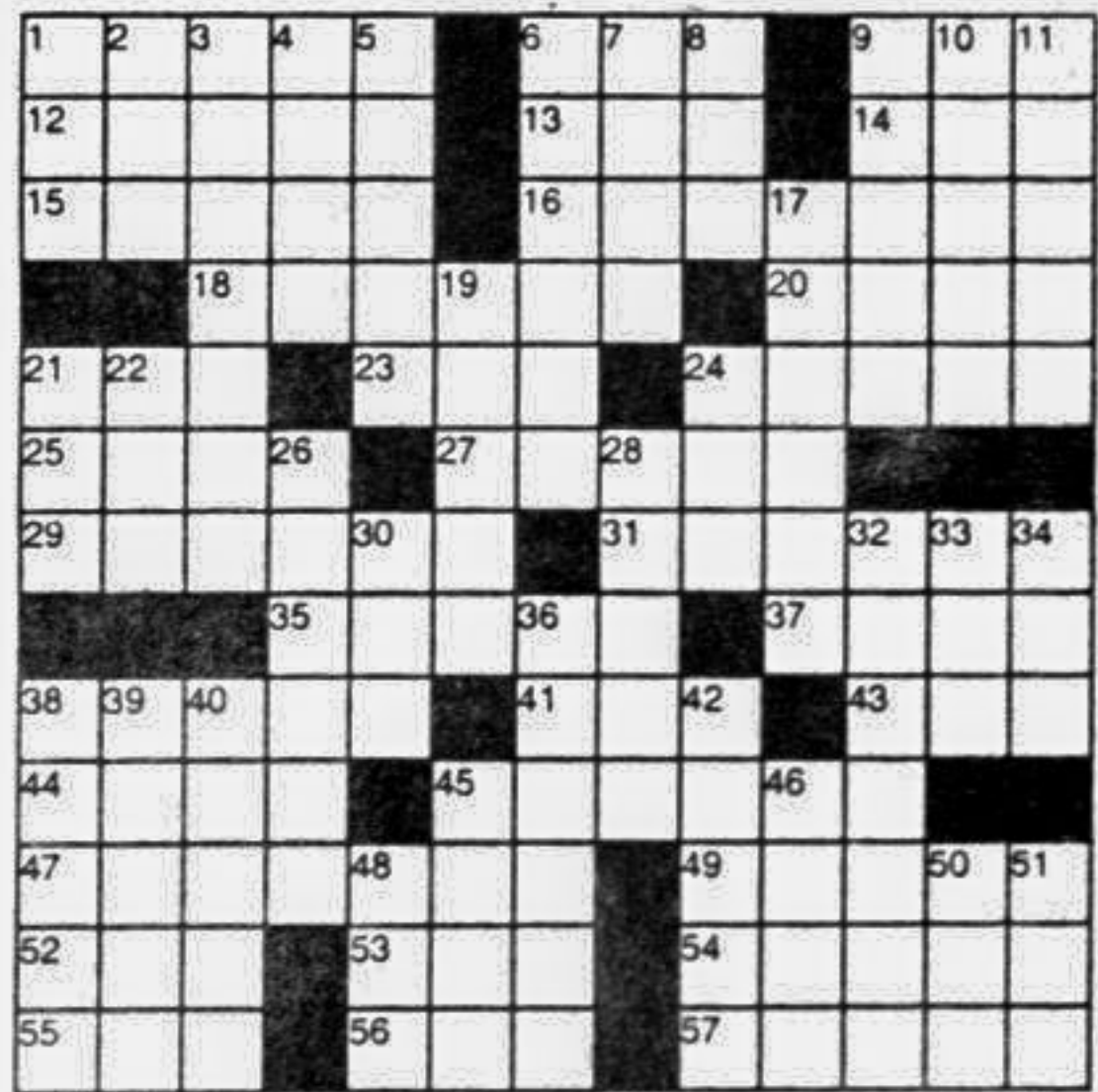
ACROSS
1 Manah, Colino, et al.
6 Mr. Ziegfeld
9 Karate expertise level
12 Ascend
13 Unprocessed
14 Copper head
15 Drama critic
16 It may be penciled in
18 Semicolon
20 Helper
21 Goller Alcott
23 Cartoonist Chast
24 Ggpalch
25 Sushi bar
27 Herbert Marx
29 Heavy hammer
31 Go back into business
35 Ball
37 One side of Santa's list?

DOWN
1 Summor lra
2 Unfriendly
3 Short, pointed beard
4 Jai —
5 Man of La Mancha
6 Directive to fleeing suspect
7 Troubadour's repertoire
8 Play with plastic
9 Mack the Knife
10 Dwelling sign
11 Fresher
12 Big ape
13 Purchase from the florist
14 Dgpalch
15 Summor lra
16 Unfriendly
17 Short, pointed beard
18 Semicolon
19 Sushibar
20 Helper
21 Goller Alcott
23 Cartoonist Chast
24 Ggpalch
25 Sushi bar
27 Herbert Marx
29 Heavy hammer
31 Go back into business
35 Ball
37 One side of Santa's list?

21 Boon of burden
22 — der
24 Orangutan
26 Vortices
28 Stay by the mirror
30 Wander about
32 Braid, maybe
33 "Foucault's Pendulum" writer
34 Post-deductions
36 Bracelet adornments
38 Grassies
39 Godly blood
40 No. 1
42 Jack Sprat's diet
45 Soccer legend
46 Strong temptation
48 Indispensable
50 Under the weather
51 Misérables

Solution time: 24 mins.
THOR BOW ABBA
RAVE TDO LITAM
ITEM GAL UGLY
SENIOR FEMMES
SKIT ANNO
JABIS LIBRANCY
ELITE EMERSON
TIGERRAG LYON
AXE DUE
TOPPLE ASTRAY
ALPO ADD TACO
SALIS RED EVER
KNEE LOY RIDE

Yesterday's answer



CRYPTOQUIP

T W W I B Y K X U I M Y U Z A

G W T F Z U D D B Y Y B D E U

Z K U F X U T G Z A C U Z

E T M C K Z B D Z K U D U Z

Yesterday's Cryptiquip: I DON'T LIKE THAT CRUDE CHIEF. HE OFTEN MAKES DISTASTEFUL REMARKS.

Today's Cryptiquip clue: G equals P

The Cryptiquip 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.