

NSW in sight of defeat

SYDNEY, Dec 11: New South Wales were facing their worst season in a proud 107-year cricketing history as they lurched toward yet another Sheffield Shield defeat against Tasmania at the SCG Saturday, reports AFP.

Chasing 348 runs for victory, the Blues limped to stumps on day three at 127 for six.

Never before has NSW suffered the ignominy of failing to record even one first innings victory in a season but that is what is looming for this revamped side.

Again it was 39-year-old Mark Rigby who made the early inroads, getting rid of Greg Hayne and Corey Richards before left arm seamer Andrew Downton snapped up three wickets.

Earlier spinner Daniel Mars (104) and wicketkeeper Mark Atkinson scored a match-winning partnership of 97 in Tasmania's second innings of 259.

In Brisbane, rain and a stubborn lower-order batting performance from Western Australia put the skids on Queensland's inevitable charge to victory at the Gabba.

Queensland needed two wickets on Sunday's final day for another outright win after play on the third day was abandoned with just 13 balls sent down after tea.

Western Australia resume at 216 for eight in their second innings, still needing 25 runs to make Queensland bat again after former Test swing bowler Adam Dale again starred.

In Melbourne, Victoria were on target for another outright victory with only South Australian skipper Darren Lehmann standing between them and a fourth successive outright win for the first time in 20 years.

At stumps on day three, South Australia were struggling at 2-5 in their second innings, having been set 347 runs for victory after Victoria declared their second innings at 304 for eight just before stumps.

African 2000 Champions' League draw Easy openers for finalists



JOHANNESBURG, Dec 11: Sunday's 1999 African Champions' League Cup finalists, Esperance of Tunisia and Morocco's Raja Casablanca, were handed easy starts to the 2000 Champions' League campaign in the draw released by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) on Saturday, reports Reuters.

However both clubs will have to wait until mid-February to know the identity of their first-round opponents in the campaign, for which they have both already qualified irrespective of Sunday's result in Tunis.

Esperance, who are heavily fancied to win this year's final, play either Dragons l'Oueme of Benin or Chad's Renaissance in the first round in March. The preliminary round match between the two sides will be played over two legs at the end of January and a fortnight later.

Raja's opponents will be either Port Authority of Gambia or the Liberian club LPFC Oilers.

The draw for next year's Champions' League includes five of the eight sides who competed in this year's league format competition.

A record total of 45 countries have entered their champions in next year's tournament which is played on a knockout basis until the last eight are determined. The teams are then split into two groups and the competition is played in a league format.

The draw is traditionally decided by CAF's competitions committee, based on geographical considerations to cut down travel expenses for cash-strapped clubs.

Missing next year will be the champions from Djibouti, Mauritania, Mozambique, Sao Tome e Principe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Swaziland and Togo, who did not enter, presumably because of financial constraints.

The African Cup Winners' Cup draw includes four former African champions, with ASEC Abidjan of the Ivory Coast and Egypt's Zamalek considered the early favourites.

Club Africain of Tunisia, who lost in this year's Cup Winners' Cup final earlier this month, return to the competition with a tie against either Mogas '90 of Benin or Gambia's Wallidan.

CAF Cup holders Etoile Sahel, also from Tunisia, begin the defence of their trophy in March against either Alasad Moundou of Chad or El Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, who play in the only CAF Cup preliminary round tie early in the new year.

Also entered into the tournament are TP Mazembe from Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who were a dominant force in continental football some 20 years ago and won the African Champions' Cup in 1967 and 1968.

Soccercide

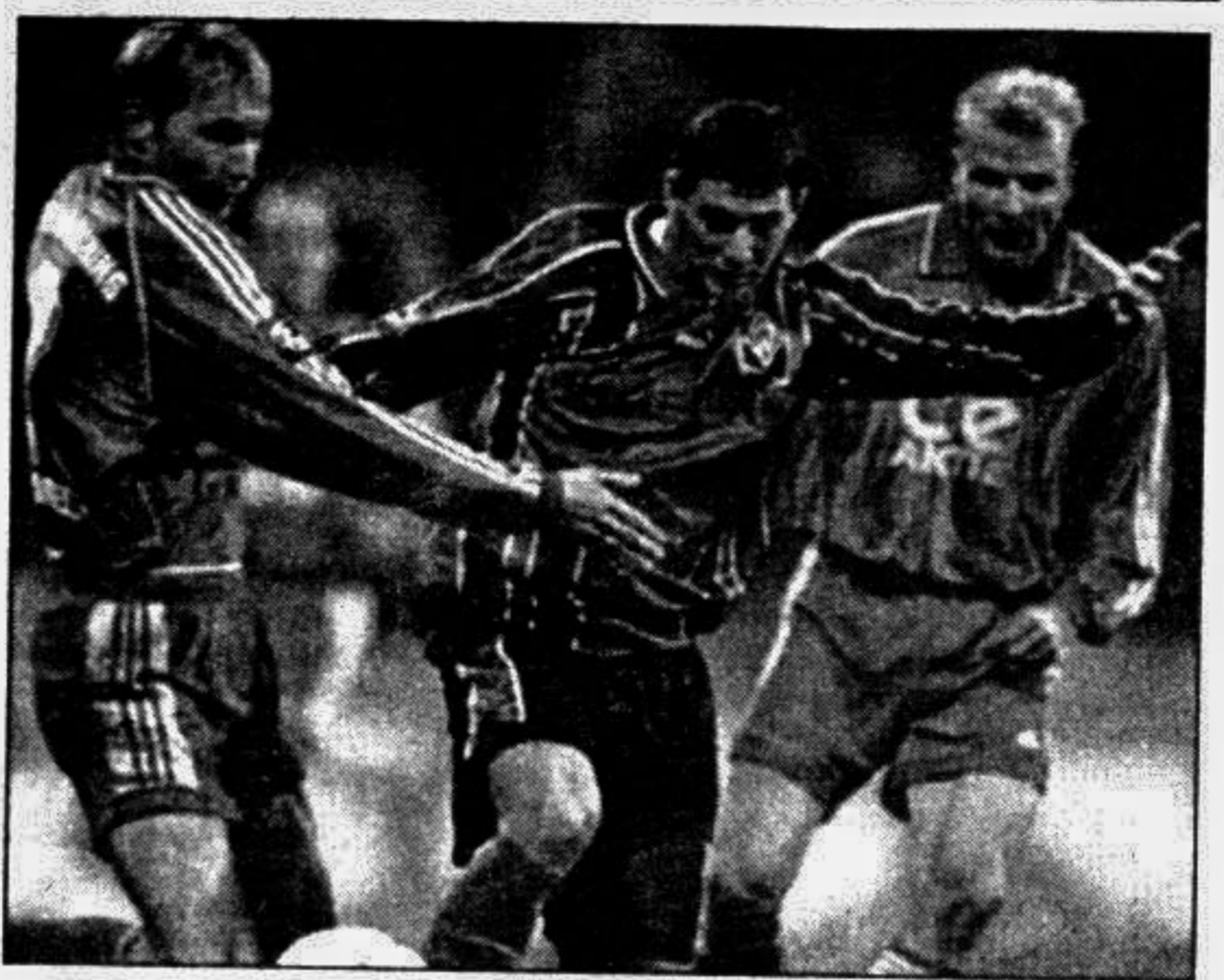
BOGOTA, Dec 11: A soccer player from leading Colombian Club America committed suicide on Friday, a team spokesman said, reports Reuters.

Central defender Carlos Montoya, 26, hung himself at his home in a working-class district of Cali, America's home city.

Montoya had been suffering from depression, was in financial difficulties and had been receiving psychiatric treatment, the spokesman said.

Montoya was generally on the substitutes' bench rather than in the starting line-up but coach Jaime de la Pava said he had a bright future at the club.

America are nine times Colombian champions and have qualified for the final of this year's tournament, where they face either Atletico Nacional or Medellin.



Werder Bremen's Peruvian star Claudio Pizarro (C) tries to break free from two SpVgg Unterhaching players during their Bundesliga clash at Bremen on December 10.

—AFP photo

Rain ruins Auckland's reply

AUCKLAND, Dec 11: Auckland made a solid start chasing the West Indies total of 380 before rain denied them a full session at the end of the second day of their four-day match today, reports Reuters.

Auckland were 120 for two when rain stopped play during the tea interval at Eden Park. Play was called off an hour before the scheduled close of 6 pm (0500 GMT).

The West Indies earlier resumed their first innings at 330 for seven and lost tallender Franklyn Rose almost immediately, trapped leg before by left-arm seamer Richard Morgan without adding to his overnight score of 16.

Number seven batsman Ridley Jacobs pushed aggressively towards a century after resuming on 52 not out but was left stranded on 86 when the final two wickets fell.

Morgan claimed five West Indies wickets for 75 in an impressive 26-over spell.

It was his first five-wicket haul in only his second first-class match and his first for Auckland.

Auckland began their innings confidently, Tim McIntosh and former New Zealand opener Blair Pocock withstanding some accurate opening bowling by Rose and Reon King.

McIntosh was the first to go, caught at short forward point by Jimmy Adams off off-spinner Nehemiah Perry for 30 with the home side then on 69. Pocock later fell to King for 29.

SCOREBOARD

AUCKLAND, Dec 11: Scoreboard after the second day in the four-day match between the West Indies and Auckland on Saturday:

Table with columns: WEST INDIES: First innings (overnight 330-7), Auckland: First innings (overnight 120-2). Includes player names and scores.

Fall of wickets: 1-3: 2-4: 3-22: 4-61: 5-212: 6-237: 7-313: 8-331: 9-351.

Table with columns: Batters: O M R W, Bowlers: O M R W. Lists player statistics.

Auckland: First innings. Pocock c Powell b King 29. Alken not out 34. Lynch not out 34. Extras: (nb-15, b-4, lb-4) 23. Total: (For two wickets in 46 overs) 120. Fall of wickets: 1-69: 2-98. To bat: A Barnes, R King, R Young, B Walker, K Mills, R Morgan, K Walmisley.

Question remarks remain over whether veterans such as Alan Shearer - top scorer in Euro 1996 - and David Seaman still deserve their places. The stage could be set for David Beckham to reproduce the same performance in an England shirt that he does for his club side Manchester United.

Topsport buys UCB's TV rights

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 11: The United Cricket Board of South Africa has concluded a 108-million-rand (17.5-million-dollar) deal with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) for television coverage of all international matches played here over the next five years, reports AFP.

The public broadcaster's sporting arm, Topsport, has purchased the free-to-air terrestrial TV rights for Test matches and one-day internationals played in South Africa between April 2000 and March 2005, the Citizen newspaper reported on Saturday.

The announcement was made by UCB manager Ali Bacher during the second Test between South Africa and England at St George's Park in Port Elizabeth on Friday.

"This means all sections of our society will be able to follow and support the national team, will consolidate the support that side already has and be of tremendous help in spreading and developing support even further," he added.

As part of the arrangement, a regular half-hour slot, dealing specifically with cricket development, would be introduced. The SABC would provide ball-by-ball radio coverage of all international matches played.

The SABC is at liberty as the rights holder to sub-licence Test matches if it is unable to cover all the games, thereby ensuring the coverage remains free-to-air.

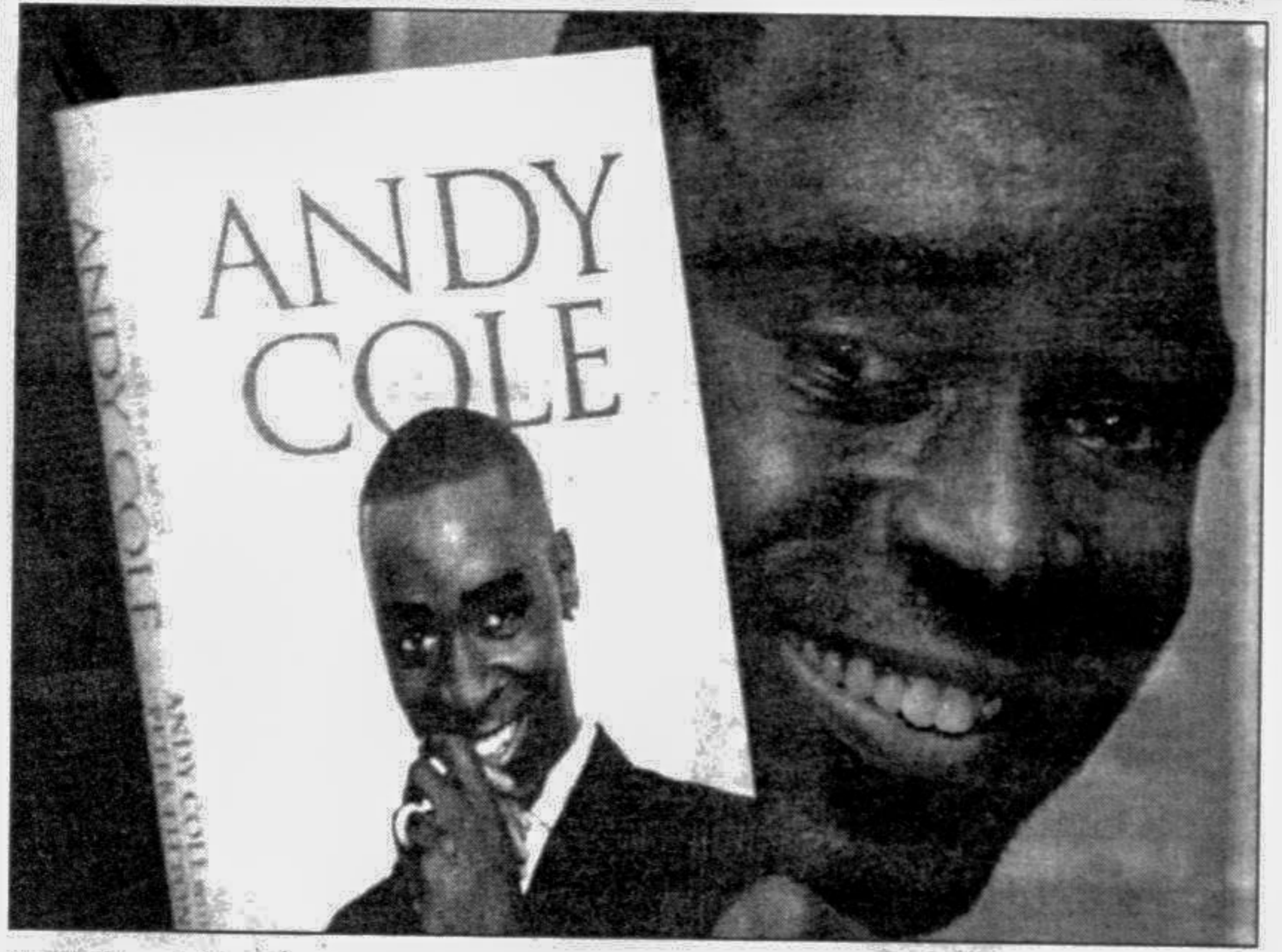
Small victory for Beckham

LONDON, Dec 11: England and Manchester United star David Beckham has won back his driving licence pending his appeal against an eight-month driving ban, his lawyer said on Friday, reports Reuters.

Beckham was banned after he was found guilty of speeding by a court on Thursday. He was also fined 800 pounds (1,299 dollars) and ordered to pay 190 pounds (308 dollars) in costs.

An earlier request to return the licence was refused, but a judge overruled that decision after an appeal from Beckham's lawyer, Nicholas Freeman.

Freeman has also lodged an appeal against the driving ban at Stockport Magistrates Court. The case is expected to resume next week.



England and Manchester United striker Andy Cole displays a copy of his autobiography during a function in London on December 10.

—AFP photo

Arch-foes wait & see

BRUSSELS, Dec 11: Eternal European adversaries England and Germany could be paired together for a second time in a week when the draw for the Euro 2000 finals in Holland and Belgium is made here on Sunday, reports AFP.

On Tuesday, England and Germany were drawn together in the Tokyo draw for the 2002 World Cup to be staged in South Korea and Japan.

And this time the long-time rivals could also be drawn in the same pool alongside the reigning world champions France. A match between England and France would also be something of a grudge match given the bitter dispute between the two countries and recent claims by France midfielders Patrick Vieira and Emmanuel Petit of anti-French prejudice in the English top flight.

But England and Germany is a more long-standing rivalry. That competition, notwithstanding historical tensions between two countries on opposing sides of two World Wars in this century, saw its modern era begin in 1966 when England beat West Germany 4-2 in the World Cup final.

German fans are still aggrieved by the decision of a Soviet linesman Tokif Bakhramov to allow England's third goal in that match.

Since then Germany have dominated and they came back from 0-2 behind to beat England 3-2 in the 1970 World Cup in Mexico and also eliminated England on penalties in the 1990 World Cup and the 1996 European Championships.

Matches with Germany and France would ensure a historic context for England, who booked their place in Holland and Germany after a two-legged play-off with their oldest rivals of all - Scotland.

To make matters worse, the Czech Republic, runners-up to Germany in the last European Championships in England, could also end up in England's pool. The Czechs were by far the most impressive qualifiers with a 100 per cent record.

A group with Germany, France, the Czech Republic and England would inevitably earn the tag "the group of death".

But the draw might throw together a far less-damning series of opponents and England could equally find themselves drawn alongside Belgium, Norway and Portugal.

Cynics would point out that given England's lacklustre performance in qualifying, that sides like Belgium, Norway and Portugal would not be particularly perturbed at facing Kevin Keegan's side.

But the possibility of a Group A containing Germany, France, the Czech Republic and England remained the most intriguing possibility after UEFA on Friday decided on a procedure of four pots for the draw on Sunday.

The first pot will contain joint hosts Holland and Belgium alongside defending champions Germany and Spain, who get in the top group by virtue of having the highest UEFA rating.

The other 12 teams are divided according to their performances in qualifying.

The second pot contains Romania, Norway, Sweden and the Czech Republic, who all won their groups with something to spare.

World champions France and another leading European nation, Italy, make up pot three with Portugal and Yugoslavia.

England, who limped into Euro 2000 through the play-offs and were the last nation to qualify, will be alongside Turkey, Denmark and Slovenia - and cannot, therefore, meet those countries in the group section.

That also means that Yugoslavia, who saw off opposition from bitter Balkan rivals Croatia and Macedonia in qualifying, could face another team created by the break-up of the Yugoslav federation in Slovenia, the most unexpected qualifiers.

Germany, the top seeds in Group A, will play their first three matches in Liege, Belgium on June 11, Charleroi, Belgium on June 17 and Rotterdam, Netherlands on June 20.

Belgium will play all their Group B matches at the King Baudouin Stadium in Brussels on June 10, 14 and 19 while co-hosts Holland will play their Group D fixtures at the Amsterdam Arena on June 11 and 21 and at Rotterdam's Kuip on June 15.

Spain will play in Group C at Rotterdam on July 12, Amsterdam in July 18 and Bruges, Belgium on June 21.

Four-month jail term for Croft

IPSWICH, England, Dec 11: Gary Croft, a defender with English First Division promotion-chasers Ipswich Town, was Friday jailed for four months for a series of driving offences and attempting to pervert the course of justice, reports AFP.

Croft, who was arrested while driving from the club's training ground in September, pleaded guilty to all charges at Ipswich Crown Court.

The 25-year-old was sentenced to one week, two weeks and one month imprisonment on three separate counts of driving while disqualified.

He also received two four-month sentences on two separate counts of attempting to pervert the course of justice.

All sentences are to run concurrently, while the former England Under-21 international was also disqualified from driving for one year.

Croft, who signed for Ipswich from Blackburn Rovers for 800,000 pounds three months ago, was accompanied in court by town manager George Burley.

Ipswich later threw their support behind Croft, saying he will return to playing for them when he has finished his sentence.

Club chairman David Sheepshears said in a statement: "We clearly deplore such conduct and accept the severe punishment that Gary Croft has received."

"We are nevertheless very disappointed for him, and I can confirm that we will be supporting him."

"He has been openly contrite about the incident and keen to make amends ever since by playing his full part both on and off the pitch."

What the pots contain



BRUSSELS, Dec 11 (AFP) - Teams in the hat for Euro 2000 draw were Sunday:

POT 1 Germany (Group A) Coach: Erich Ribbeck. Key players: Oliver Bierhoff, Michael Preetz, Lothar Matthaus.

Reports of the demise of German football are premature. Since their disappointing World Cup exit at the hands of Croatia in the quarterfinals they have admittedly had a poor series of friendly results.

But apart from an early slip up against Turkey they proved they are still a formidable force in real competition and won their group.

Most importantly of all they are defending champions. It will be the last international hurrah of Lothar Matthaus, a veteran of five World Cups and 143 caps -- a world record he shares with Swedish goalkeeper Thomas Ravelli.

Belgium (Group B) Coach: Robert Waseige. Key players: Marc Wilmots, Branko Strupar, Emile Mpenza. As co-hosts they will be expected to do well but -- unlike for Holland -- a place in the semi-finals will probably be seen as an acceptable outcome.

Their form was giving real concern but the replacement of Georges Leekens as coach by Waseige in August seems to have revitalised the "Red Devils".

Waseige has introduced a 4-2-2 system and the players have responded with an impressive string of results, notably a 3-1 friendly win in Italy.

Spain (Group C) Coach: Jose Antonio Camacho. Key players: Raul, Fernando Morientes, Josep Lloberria. Spain have often flattered to deceive in big tournaments and want to bury their tag as "chokers".

Camacho has steadied a Spanish galleon that was listing badly last year under the leadership of former boss Javier Clemente. A first round exit in Euro qualifying defeat in Cyprus heralded the end of the Clemente era.

Raul and Morientes have been in free-scoring form since Camacho took over and, with youngsters such as Valencia goalkeeper Santiago Canizares coming in, the time could be right to make a new start.

Spain are the reigning world youth champions and can rely on a string of young players coming through in the next few years.

Holland (Group D) Coach: Frank Rijkaard. Key players: Jaap Stam, Edgar Davids, Ruud van Nistelrooy. Only victory will do for Holland on home soil and the Dutch FA have enlisted Frank Rijkaard, a stalwart of the Marco Van Basten-inspired team that won Euro 1988, as coach to the national team.

The noisy Dutch fans -- clad in orange and backed by brass bands, always provide for a memorable atmosphere.

Holland's last European campaign -- in England in Euro 96 -- was blown apart by intense defensive feuds. Davids was sent home and the players split into two camps on largely racial lines.

Rijkaard, dubbed the "Black Tulip", has had a dismal sequence of results -- one win in 12 games. But they have all been friendlies and the real action starts in June.

POT 2 Romania Coach: Emeric Ienei. Key players: George Hagi, George Popescu, Adrian Ilie. Romania won their group in style but a player coup has since led to the sacking of Victor Piturca and his replacement by Ienei.

Ienei is an affable figure and has earned the nickname "nea Imi" -- uncle Imi -- among his players.

But Hagi -- dubbed "the Maradona of the Carpathians" -- will almost certainly be appearing in his final big tournament and he is by no means the only 30-something player likely to be hanging up his boots.

Ilie, nicknamed "the Cobra", is the best of the younger generation.

Norway Coach: Nils Semb. Key players: Tore Andre Flo, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, Kjetil Rekdal. Semb has had a difficult task -- filling the boots (Wellington boots that is) of his eccentric predecessor Egil Olsen, who transformed the Scandinavian country into a real force in world football.

He has stuck with the same system bequeathed by Olsen playing a direct and uncomplicated style -- not surprising as many Norway players play their trade in the English Premier-ship.

A good performance in Holland and Belgium will allow Semb to firmly consign the Olsen era into the history books.

Sweden Coach: Tommy Soderberg. Key players: Stefan Schwarz, Magnus Erlingmark, Magnus Hedman. Times have been lean since Sweden finished third in the 1994 World Cup but at last they are back on the big stage after a convincing qualifying campaign in which they outplayed England twice.

Organisation is the key to Sweden, who play a very English-style game and are great believers in the team ethic.

The loss of Henrik Larsson after he broke his leg for his Scottish club side Celtic against Lyon could be a big blow, however.

Czech Republic Coach: Jozef Chovanec. Key players: Jan Koller, Patrik Berger, Pavel Nedved. The Czechs were runners-up to Germany last time in England, sunk by Oliver Bierhoff's golden goal at Wembley.

They failed to qualify for France 98 but they were the first nation to book their spot in Euro 2000 after cackwalking their group and not dropping a single point.

The loss of Berger through suspension for the first two matches will be a blow but the Czechs won the European title in 1976 and have proved a formidable team in this tournament.

POT 3 France Coach: Roger Lemerre. Key players: Zinedine Zidane, Lilian Thuram, Marcel Desailly. World champions France are bidding to add the continental crown to their global prize and in the end topped their qualifying pool after more than a few scares on the way.

The absence of Zidane for four matches through injury saw France falter badly and their maestro's return saw them just do enough to qualify. The absence of a world-class striker is the one glaring gap on Lemerre's team sheet.

Lemerre, who inherited the job from World Cup-winner Rene Jaquet, strongly hinted he was contemplating quitting in the weeks after France qualified amid rumours of senior players such as Didier Deschamps and Laurent Blanc exerting undue influence in team matters.

But Lemerre will be at the helm for Euro 2000 which could be the last hurrah for many of the heroes of France '98.

Italy Coach: Dino Zoff. Key players: Alessandro Del Piero, Francesco Totti, Filippo Inzaghi. Italy started qualifying in top gear but in the end limped over the qualification finishing line after closing with a 3-2 home defeat by Denmark and a 0-0 draw in Belarus.

That brought the knives out for Zoff, who found out that the national hero status he earned as a 1982 World Cup-winner counts for nothing when you are in charge of the Azzurri.

A friendly defeat by Belgium turned the heat up further. In that match Zoff had abandoned his usual tactics and tried a three-pronged attack featuring Del Piero, Inzaghi and Totti.

Zoff still has six months to find the system that suits him and his players.

Portugal Coach: Humberto Coelho. Key players: Luis Figo, Rui Costa, Ricardo Sa Pinto. Portugal qualified for these finals as the best of the runner-up teams. They have already booked their tickets for Euro 2004 as they will be the host nation.

This tournament probably represents the last chance of success at senior level for the team that twice won the under-20 World Cup in 1989 and 1991.

Figo is the one member of that team to fulfil his promise at senior level -- along with Brazilian Rivaldo he has been the star turn with Barcelona this season.

At 27, Figo could still hope to be there for Euro 2004. But next summer represents his best chance yet.

Yugoslavia Coach: Vujadin Boskov. Key players: Sinisa Mihajlovic, Dejan Stankovic, Vladimir Jugovic. Yugoslavia qualified for Euro 2000 in a group that was wrecked by the NATO offensive in Kosovo -- with matches having to be postponed for security reasons.

And to add spice that qualification group included Balkan arch-enemies Croatia and Macedonia. Their 2-2 draw in Zagreb that saw Yugoslavia through and Croatia eliminated sparked wild celebrations in a country that has had a dismal 1999.

The architect of that victory was Mihajlovic, who is widely held to be the best free-kick taker in the world.

Boskov only took the helm in June after Milan Zivadinovic was sacked for agreeing a deal with a Saudi Arabian club.

England Coach: Kevin Keegan. Key players: David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Michael Owen. Whatever happens, just being there is an achievement for the Slovenes. But the best could be yet to come.

England are the luckiest team to reach Euro 2000, having Sweden's victory over Poland to thank for earning them an unlikely play-off spot. In that play-off they beat Scotland to become the 16th and final team through.

It was a dire qualifying campaign in which only Paul Scholes and Sol Campbell really enhanced their standing as players. To be fair, England had to change coaches in mid-campaign when Glenn Hoddle was forced to quit for ill-judged remarks about the disabled. Keegan was the new man.

Question remarks remain over whether veterans such as Alan Shearer -- top scorer in Euro 1996 -- and David Seaman still deserve their places. The stage could be set for David Beckham to reproduce the same performance in an England shirt that he does for his club side Manchester United.

Turkey Coach: Mustafa Denizli. Key players: Hakan Sukur, Serkan Yalcin, Arif Erdem. Turkey earned their spot via a stormy two-legged play-off win over the Republic of Ireland and like Yugoslavia their victory was a rare reason to celebrate for a country ravaged by disaster. This time natural in the form of earthquakes.

The Turks are eager to rededicate themselves for a disappointing showing in Euro 1996 in England and looked a useful outfit in qualifying, beating Germany 1-0 in an early qualifier.

"Bull of the Bosphorus" Hakan Sukur scored that goal but Sukur is widely dependent on Serkan Yalcin, who is the key creator in the side.

Denmark Coach: Bo Johansson. Key players: Peter Schmeichel, Ebbe Sand, Jesper Hogg. Denmark famously won the 1992 European Championships in Sweden as stand-in replacements for Yugoslavia -- who had been expelled because of United Nations sanctions.

They spent most of their time preparing for that tournament on various beaches in Europe. A similarly relaxed approach by Israeli players -- reported to have spent the eve of their play-off match with Denmark in the company of call girls -- also seems to have been to Denmark's benefit this time around.

Johansson will step down after Euro 2000 and few would bet against Schmeichel -- a survivor of that 1992 side -- doing the same. It is Denmark's first real international challenge since the retirement of the Laudrup brothers, Michael and Brian.

Slovenia Coach: Srecko Katancic. Key players: Zlatko Zahovic, Marinko Galic, Darko Milanic. No-one expected them to qualify but after their heroics in Group Two no-one should take Slovenia lightly.

The fledgling Balkan nation are the long shots after qualifying against the odds via the play-offs against a star-studded Ukraine side including Andriy Shevchenko and Serhiy Rebrov. The fact that Ukraine had twice held world champions France in their group matches illustrates the achievement.

Zahovic has proved a prolific scorer and could make an even bigger name for himself in Holland and Belgium.

Whatever happens, just being there is an achievement for the Slovenes. But the best could be yet to come.