

Cesar to miss World C'ships

MADRID, Dec 22: Real Madrid central defender Julio Cesar will miss the World Club Championship in Brazil next month because of injury, the Spanish club said today, reports Reuters.

The Brazilian dislocated his left shoulder during Real's 3-1 win over Alaves in the Spanish league on Tuesday and will be out of action for around a month.

Good news for Celtic

GLASGOW, Dec 22: Scottish Premiership giants Celtic received a boost on Wednesday when their 4.8 million pounds (7.7 million dollars) Brazilian signing Rafael Felipe Scheidt was granted a work permit for the next three years, reports AFP.

The Department of Employment confirmed that the 23-year-old international defender would be allowed to move to the Glasgow club from Gremio Porto Alegre.

Rafael, as the player is to be known, will link up with the club after the winter break, which starts following the bitter Glasgow Derby between Celtic and their arch-rivals Rangers, who currently lead the championship by a point from Celtic, on December 27.

The independent panel, which met in Glasgow on Tuesday, had been expected to finalise their verdict on Thursday once it had been approved by a Labour Government Junior Education minister.

But now a positive verdict has been delivered meaning Rafael, who has agreed a four-and-a-half-year contract, will be able to be paraded as a Celtic player in the New Year.

Rafael's case for a work permit was undermined by his failure to have played 75 percent of his country's internationals during the past two years.

However Celtic made a firm case for the player's credentials stressing he has now established himself in the Brazilian full squad and got expert references to vouch for his quality.

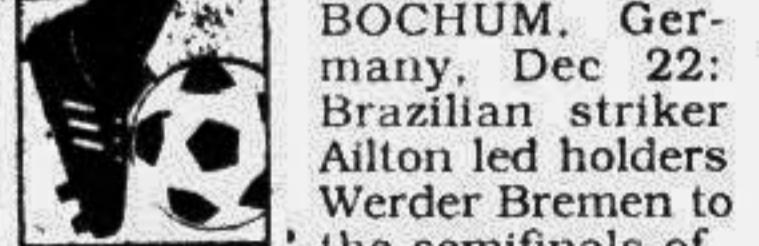
A Department for Education and Employment spokesman said: "Celtic's application has been issued today for the length of three years with immediate effect."

Scheidt, made his debut for Porto Alegre-based Gremio in 1994 and spent one season in Japan before returning to Brazil where he was called up for the national team squad.



Werder Bremen's Brazilian striker Ailton (No 32) scores one of his two goals against VfL Bochum in the German Cup quarterfinals on December 21. Bremen won 2-1. — Star photo

Bremen ride on Ailton



BOCHUM, Germany, Dec 22: Brazilian striker Ailton led holders Werder Bremen to the semifinals of the German Cup Wednesday evening with two late goals against Second Division club VfL Bochum, reports AFP.

Last year Ailton, the most expensive transfer in Bremen's history, was criticised for being overweight and unwilling to make the necessary adjustments to German life.

A lonely figure with little confidence, he was ignored by ex-coach Felix Magath and told to look for a new club. But since Magath's resignation last winter and his replacement by the quietly spoken Thomas Schaaf, Ailton has flourished.

He struck in the 79th and 88th minutes to spark an unexpected recovery for Bremen who controlled the first half but faltered after the break.

Both sides delivered a classic Cup game with the usual cautious tactics of Bundesliga football thrown overboard in favour of full blown attack.

Bochum held off Bremen's first half challenge and then revived themselves up after the switch of ends so that Achim

Weber marked the first goal of the evening on 63 minutes.

"That goal put us out of killer," Bremen coach Schaaf said. "Overall though we played very well. The real winners however were the fans because it was fun to watch the great passion with which both sides went to work. I wish we would always play with that amount of heart in the Bundesliga too."

Bochum played above themselves but were beaten with 15 minutes after Werder's goal wasting chances en masse to score again and then were punished by Ailton's equaliser on 79 minutes.

Bremen captain Marco Bode, stationary on the edge of the area with his back to the net, tapped the ball over to the chunky Brazilian as he came charging through.

The 88th minute winner was also a Bode-Ailton co-production. Bochum keeper Thomas Ernst stopped Bode's shot from three metres with his leg but the German international flicked the rebounding ball over to Ailton who tapped into an empty net.

Bremen, who have won the Cup on four occasions, now have the impeccable record of reaching the competition's

semi-final stage on six occasions in the last 10 years.

"It was an interesting and exciting match," Bode said. "We had enough chances to take the lead before the break, but as so often happens, it was Bochum who got the first goal. Maybe someone should do some research into why we play so well in the Cup. I've personally been in Berlin [for the final] five times. I hope I get a sixth."

"We've shown what sort of form we are capable of in the last few weeks," Bochum goalkeeper Thomas Ernst added. "Our goal for this season remains promotion to the First Division."

Wednesday's was the final match for Bochum coach Bernard Dietz who has voluntarily stood down so as to avoid the stressful limelight of professional football and return to coaching Bochum's juniors team.

The remaining German Cup quarterfinal matches will be played on Wednesday Stuttgart Kickers vs Freiburg, Bayern Munich vs Mainz 05 and Hansa Rostock vs VfB Stuttgart.

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Graf, of course, had done it all before but given her blossoming romance she was all the more delighted to win her own Roland Garros showdown against Swiss teen Martina Hingis, who in frustration at her loss and with the crowd solidly against her promptly threw a tantrum after the final.

The 30-year-old German was presented with the medal of the Olympic Order after retiring by International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Juan Antonio Samaranch for her contribution to sport.

"It was not easy to take this decision (to quit) but the competition had become too difficult for me," said Graf, who was joined in retirement by compatriot and triple Wimbledon champ Boris Becker.

While Agassi and Graf dominated the headlines for much of the year, they were by no means alone when it came to the serious business of stacking up the silverware.

Graf's image — and her departure from court to court — was the talk in the women's game in particular, of hard-hitting young guns about to inherit the tennis earth, the two names on everyone's lips in 1999 were two of the oldest racket-swingers in town: Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf.

There were tears from both

as Agassi roared back to compete a remarkable period having finished 1997 ranked 122 in the world to end the Millennium at the top of the tree.

Graf, too, had a rollercoaster time as she forced herself back into the fray despite months of injury troubles and took the French Open before bowing out of top competition after going down in the Wimbledon final.

What made the pair's achievements all the more plaudent — and gave the media many a field day — was the fact that the duo became a tandem on a personal level.

Happiness in their private lives appeared to galvanise both and Agassi in particular was on fire in Grand Slam terms with wins at Roland Garros and the US Open.

The Garros win — he would also go on to pick up the Paris Open — sent the shaven-headed star into the history books as he became the first man to win all the Slams on different surfaces.

Ending the year as world number one allowed him to achieve one of his few remaining sporting ambitions and cock a snook at rival and fellow American Pete Sampras, who at least had the satisfaction of handing him a sound beating at London SW19.

It was all the culmination of a career which began when, aged just four, Agassi hit with such tennis greats as Bjorn Borg, Ilie Nastase and Harold Solomon before going on to become a teenage prodigy of Nick Bollettieri.

The 29-year-old had won his first Grand Slam title at Wimbledon in 1992, and took the Australian Open and the US Open twice before he finally triumphed on the slow red clay of Roland Garros. He then duly won again back in the States, beating another US star in the shape of Todd Martin 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-7 (2/7), 6-3, 6-2.

Yet it was at Roland Garros where his career reached its apogee with an enthralling five-set win over another comeback kid — unseeded Ukrainian Andrei Medvedev.

Agassi found himself two sets behind before the realisation dawned that he was letting himself down on the threshold of his greatest feat.

He had already eclipsed the latter's record for total weeks at number 1 in reaching his 271st week at the top after Wimbledon.

Sampras' achievements are all the more remarkable given that he missed a big chunk of the season, including the US Open, after suffering a herniated disc injury.

Whether a new ranking system for next year — to be known as the ATP Champions Race 2000 — will cut down the incidence of injury is questionable.

"I take this one over Wimbledon any time," said the big server. "This is the biggest moment of my life."



STEFFI GRAF

Sampras' Wimbledon triumph handed him his 12th Grand Slam title — tying the record held by Australian Emerton.

Sampras, undisputed grass-court king with six Wimbledon titles, later didn't just beat Agassi at Hanover — he thrashed him 6-1, 7-5, 6-4 to win the 3.6-million-dollar event for the fifth time in a decade, tying Ivan Lendl's record.

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"I almost feel like it had nothing to do with me — like it was sheer destiny," said Agassi, who had only twice previously won a five-setter after losing the first two sets.

"I know this will change my

life for ever. This was the greatest thing I could ever do."

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When it came to the Slams it was 17-year-old Serena who made the breakthrough as she came up big in her first Grand Slam final at the US Open, beating world number one Hingis.

En route, Serena ousted defending champion Lindsay Davenport, who had to be satisfied with stealing Graf's thunder in the Wimbledon final.

Serena, who won the doubles crown alongside Venus, even toyed with the idea of facing a few men — but the men's professional tour refused to allow her entry to one of their tournaments in Stuttgart.

Teenagers Venus and Serena are the chief proponents of the women's power game and the siblings' father has long predicted they will rise to be number one and two in the world.

They're almost there after Venus took over the number three slot at year's end with her 'little' sister fourth.

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One name from the past, former teen prodigy Jennifer Capriati, made a welcome return with good runs at both the French and US Opens.

Davenport had the final say in the year when she beat title holder Hingis to take the WTA championship title in just an hour.

It was the 23-year-old American's seventh title of the season.

On a team level, Australia celebrated their first Davis Cup win in 13 years when Mark

reaching the last four from the qualifying event.

Stevenson was revealed during the tournament to be the love-child of American basketball legend Julius "Dr J" Erving.

One teen didn't quite fulfil her potential as Russian pin-up Anna Kournikova remains without a title.

As the youngsters picked off most of the top honours former Wimbledon champion Jana Novotna joined Graf in retirement.

Novotna said she believed the teen power-hitters would not necessarily herald the death of serve and volley.

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