

Sport

Jubilo Ihara's choice

TOKYO, Dec 30: Japan's World Cup captain at France '98, Masami Ihara, ended weeks of speculation about his future by announcing he would play for Asian club champions Jubilo Iwata next season, reports Reuters.

The 32-year-old central defender, who has won a record 123 caps for his country, had the pick of nine clubs after turning down an offer to join the coaching staff of Yokohama F Marinos.

"I chose Jubilo because it will be an honour to play for the J-League champions next year and to work with players and coaches of such a high standard," said Ihara.

"I hope I can contribute to their continued success with the experience I will bring from the Marinos."

Ihara spent 10 years with the Yokohama club, joining them in 1990 under their pre-J League name of Nissan. Japan's professional league kicked off in 1993 and the Marinos won the championship for the first and only time in 1995, when Ihara was also named Asian Player of the Year by the Asian Football Confederation.

At the end of the recently-completed season, Ihara was offered a coaching job with the Marinos, who will be managed next year by the former Tottenham player and manager Ossie Ardiles.

Ihara turned it down because he still hopes to play for Japan on home soil in the 2002 World Cup.

He made his debut for the national team when still at Tsukuba University in January 1988 in a friendly against the United Arab Emirates in Dubai and is now the country's most-capped player.

He also had the distinction of scoring against England at Wembley in a 2-1 defeat in the Umbro Cup in June 1995.

From the nine clubs who wanted him, Ihara narrowed his choice down to FC Tokyo, who were recently promoted to the first division; Urawa Reds, relegated to division two on the final day of the league season; and Jubilo, who won a treble of Asian Club Championship, Asian Super Cup and J League championship in 1999.

Pirri becomes Real's general manager

MADRID, Dec 30: Real Madrid have appointed Jose Martinez Pirri as general manager, the club announced on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

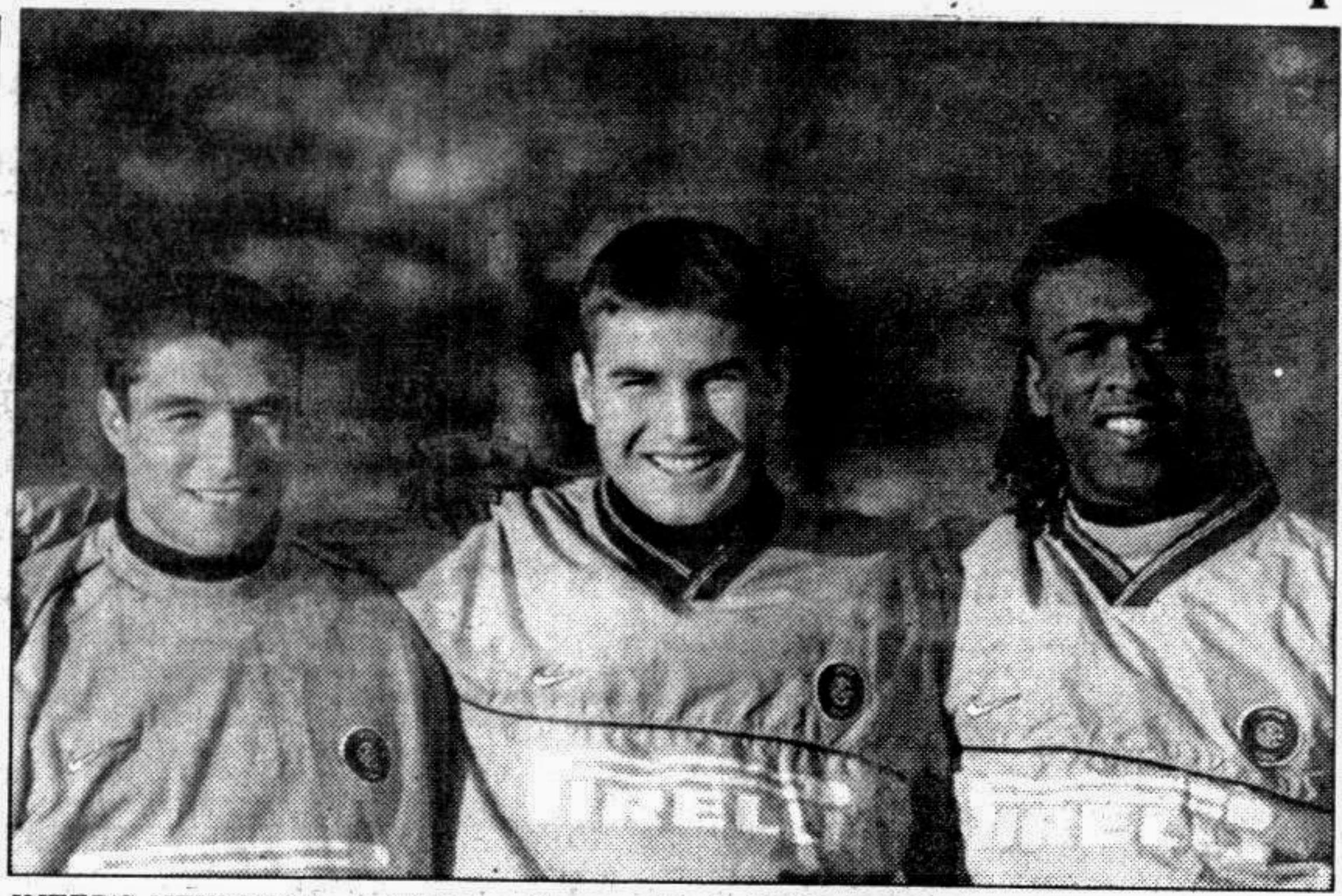
Pirri's appointment is the first step in club president Lorenzo Sanz's project to restructure Real after the club's disappointing season.

"For the first time, Real Madrid have split managerial control down the middle. Pirri will head our sports section which will be separate from the club's commercial and financial side," said Real vice-president Jilma Ussia.

Pirri, a long-standing club servant, has been given the position after negotiations with former coach Jorge Valdano broke down a week ago.

Involved with Real since 1964, the highlight of Pirri's playing career was the European Cup medal he won in 1966.

After retiring he has held a host of positions within the club, his most recent being that of technical director.



INTER'S NEW BOYS: Dutch Star Clarence Seedorf (R) poses with Romanian international Adrian Mutu (C) and Ivan Ramiro Cordoba of Colombia ahead of their first practice session at new club Inter Milan at Appiano Gentile on December 29. — AFP photo

Cordoba moved by welcome

Seedorf relishing return



ROME, Dec 30 (Reuters): In signing for Inter Milan, Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf has joined a growing group of foreign players who cannot resist a return to the Italian league.

Seedorf returns from Real Madrid three years after he left Genoa club Sampdoria.

He joins a list of foreigners including Germany's Juergen Klinsmann, Colombia's Faustino Asprilla, Argentine Diego Simeone, Yugoslav Vladimir Jugovic, Portugal's Paolo Sousa and Brazilians Adalton and Andre Cruz, who have all chosen to come back to Serie A.

"I don't have much time to think and Italy was always what I had in mind," Seedorf told reporters at his official presentation at Inter Milan on Wednesday. "Playing in the Italian league is an important experience for any players."

Cruz played in Italy with Napoli and AC Milan for over four years from 1994 to 1998 before going to Standard Liege in Belgium a year ago. But within six months he was back in Italy with newly-promoted Torino.

"I've not come back for money but because the Italian championship and a club like Torino fascinates me," the Brazilian full back said when he returned.

"Here I've got the chance to do two things: to win back my place in the national side and take on the strongest club sides in the world."

"I'm not the first nor the last Brazilian to play in Belgium but most of us have left. Often we come to Italy, which is better for us in all senses — in terms of the football, the climate and the people."

Adalton and Jugovic were also away from Italy for just a single season before returning this year.

The Brazilian forward joined Verona after leaving Parma for St Germain in 1998 while Jugovic is at Inter Milan, reunited with his former Juventus coach Marcello Lippi after a season at Spain's Atletico Madrid in 1998/99.

Men's tennis to take new look

LONDON, Dec 30 (Reuters): Men's tennis crosses the threshold of the millennium fresh from a marketing makeover and fans will hear a lot about "the race" over the next few months.

The rankings system has been revamped so every player starts the year on zero. Only the one who ends the annual race with the most points can call themselves the world number one.

Top players will now be expected to play in the nine most important ATP tournaments, a series renamed the Tennis Masters.

These nine, plus the four Grand Slams, will be the core of the men's tennis year that will build to a climax when the best eight players of the year come together for the end-of-season Tennis Masters Cup.

The main thrust of the new strategy is to streamline the professional game, make it more understandable for fans and rekindle the excitement engendered by the rivalries between the sponsors, must become the crux of a new structure.

Not everyone, of course, finds Italy to their liking second time round.

Klinsmann made his mark in three seasons at Inter between 1989 and 1992, scoring 34 goals in 95 appearances, and was full of enthusiasm when he returned to play for Sampdoria in 1997.

But he lasted less than a season and played just eight times before leaving suddenly to join England's Tottenham Hotspur. Paulo Sousa was central to the Juventus side which won the league title in 1995 and the European Cup in 1996. But he too has failed to recapture his form since his return to Italy to join Inter two years ago.

Seedorf, the latest in a long line of Italy's adopted prodigies.

He told radio station RCN of Bogota from Italy he had been invited to spend December 31 with Zanetti and his wife and industrialist Gustavo Mascardi of Argentina.

Cordoba, 23, also said Seedorf had given him a great welcome since arriving there.

"I don't have an Italian teacher yet but Zanetti and Zamorano have helped me a great deal with the language and other subjects," Cordoba said.

In the closing years of the 20th century, women's tennis overshadowed its men's equivalent thanks to the exploits of Martina Hingis, the Williams sisters and Steffi Graf.

The catalyst for the changes to the men's game was a 1997 meeting called by the ATP Tour where five leading marketing and management firms gave their opinion of what was wrong.

The message was that the game was seen as "elitist" and it had to update its image to have relevance in the modern sporting world and to attract new audiences.

Wimbledon, with its tradition, all-white clothing and lack of court-side advertisements, still meant tennis to those not closely interested in the game.

A follow-up survey by ISL, who have since signed a \$1.2 billion marketing partnership with the ATP Tour, persuaded the ATP that the players, not individual tournaments and their sponsors, must become the crux of a new structure.

Rivaldo's heart with Barcelona

RIO DE JANEIRO, Dec 30: Rivaldo on Wednesday told press in northeastern Brazil he would be staying at Barcelona till 2003 when his contract finishes at the Catalonian club, reports AFP.

The news will disappoint Manchester United, Parma, Roma, Inter Milan and Lazio, who were reportedly ready to spend 62.4 million dollars for the newly-crowned European player of the year.

Rivaldo is currently in Recife, the state capital of Pernambuco in the north east of Brazil, enjoying Christmas and New Year celebrations with his family.

"I am very happy and satisfied at Barcelona and I will not be changing team," he told local journalists at Recife, 2,500 kilometres north of Rio de Janeiro.

"I did not receive other offers, and, if it appears there was some type of negotiation, that was with Barcelona officials and not with me."

Rivaldo, who will be returning to Spain on Saturday, said he was delighted at winning the European footballer of the year trophy and having the chance of winning the world honour too.

The selection of the FIFA world player of the year will be made on January 24 in Brussels and his main rivals will be Argentinian Gabriel Batistuta of Fiorentina and David Beckham of Manchester United.

Grobba to coach South African club

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 30: Former Liverpool goalkeeper Bruce Grobba was named coach of struggling South African Premier Soccer League club SuperSport United on Wednesday, reports AFP.

A club official said Grobba, 42, would succeed Roy Matthews, who was sacked last week after United slipped to second from bottom in the 18-team national championship.

Unfashionable SuperSport caused a sensation last season by defeating star-studded Kaizer Chiefs 2-1 in the FA Cup final but have won only four of 22 league matches.

South African-born Grobba had a short spell as player-coach of Zimbabwe before guiding newly-promoted Cape Town club Seven Stars to fifth place in the 1998-1999 championship.

He joined Liverpool from Canadian club Vancouver Whitecaps in 1981 and quickly developed into a cult figure, combining brilliance with eccentricity while helping the Merseysiders to numerous English and European triumphs.

Grobba, 42, would succeed Roy Matthews, who was sacked last week after United slipped to second from bottom in the 18-team national championship.

The message was that the game was seen as "elitist" and it had to update its image to have relevance in the modern sporting world and to attract new audiences.

Wimbledon, with its tradition, all-white clothing and lack of court-side advertisements, still meant tennis to those not closely interested in the game.

A follow-up survey by ISL, who have since signed a \$1.2 billion marketing partnership with the ATP Tour, persuaded the ATP that the players, not individual tournaments and their sponsors, must become the crux of a new structure.

The message was that the game was seen as "elitist" and it had to update its image to have relevance in the modern sporting world and to attract new audiences.

Wimbledon, with its tradition, all-white clothing and lack of court-side advertisements, still meant tennis to those not closely interested in the game.

A follow-up survey by ISL, who have since signed a \$1.2 billion marketing partnership with the ATP Tour, persuaded the ATP that the players, not individual tournaments and their sponsors, must become the crux of a new structure.

The message was that the game was seen as "elitist" and it had to update its image to have relevance in the modern sporting world and to attract new audiences.

Wimbledon, with its tradition, all-white clothing and lack of court-side advertisements, still meant tennis to those not closely interested in the game.

A follow-up survey by ISL, who have since signed a \$1.2 billion marketing partnership with the ATP Tour, persuaded the ATP that the players, not individual tournaments and their sponsors, must become the crux of a new structure.

The message was that the game was seen as "elitist" and it had to update its image to have relevance in the modern sporting world and to attract new audiences.

Wimbledon, with its tradition, all-white clothing and lack of court-side advertisements, still meant tennis to those not closely interested in the game.

A follow-up survey by ISL, who have since signed a \$1.2 billion marketing partnership with the ATP Tour, persuaded the ATP that the players, not individual tournaments and their sponsors, must become the crux of a new structure.

The message was that the game was seen as "elitist" and it had to update its image to have relevance in the modern sporting world and to attract new audiences.



Danish international custodian Peter Schmeichel speaking during a media conference at Copenhagen on December 29. Schmeichel announced that he had bought Danish semi-professional club Hvidovre where he began his career. — AFP photo

AFP FOOTBALL BRIEFS

MARSEILLE, Dec 30: French World Cup winner Christophe Dugarry was finally set to sign for his former club Bordeaux, sources at his current side Marseille said Thursday.

The 27-year-old Dugarry was expected to sign terms later Thursday or at the very latest on Friday, the sources said.

Collymore has already left for England after refusing to play in a practice match.

The 28-year-old had flown to France to discuss a potential move to the struggling First Division side but Montpellier boss Michel Mezy said the transfer was off. "I wanted him to take a test, he wanted to sign first."

The former England striker is now set for showdown talks with John Gregory but the Villa manager has made it clear that Collymore has no part in his future plans.

Collymore had insisted only on Tuesday he was looking forward to the chance to begin a new career abroad.

He had said: "Maybe it's a good time to go abroad and start afresh, a change of scenery."

"We come out here to look at the facilities and I'm showing willing regarding clubs, I think it's the right way to do it."

NIELSEN BECOMES ISRAEL COACH

TEL AVIV: Denmark's Richard Moller Nielsen was on Wednesday named coach of the Israel football team, the national federation said in a press release.

The contract of the former Finland and Danish coach, who succeeds Shlomo Sharf, is for two and a half years and he will earn a million dollars. He is set to start in February 2000.

Nielsen said his aim was to instill confidence in the side and thereby help them qualify for the 2002 World Cup in Korea and Japan.

The 62-year-old Nielsen, nicknamed Ricardo, was the coach of the Danish side which won the 1992 European championship.

Israel were easily beaten by Denmark in their Euro 2000 play-off (5-0 and 3-0).

Nielsen had previously held talks in December in Geneva about the possibility of succeeding Sharf, who resigned after Israel lost their Euro 2000 play-

CHRISTOPHE DUGARRY

Marseille and Bordeaux club officials have been trying to hammer out a deal for the sale of the long-haired striker over the Christmas and New Year football break in France when transfers are allowed.

Bordeaux, the French league champions, have offered 30 million francs (4.6 million dollars), while struggling Marseille are demanding between 40 and 45 million francs.

No further details were available on what deal had been worked out.

Dugarry, the most vilified footballer in France, is desperate to leave Marseille after being particularly targeted by fans, who have made a habit of damaging cars and jostling players in recent weeks after a slump in form by the team that was edged to the First Division title by Bordeaux on the last day of last season.

After unsuccessful stints at AC Milan and Barcelona as well as a chequered career at Marseille Dugarry is anxious to return to his hometown club, the only place where he has been an

unqualified success. MONTPELLIER WON'T TAKE COLLYMORE

MONTPELLIER: Aston Villa's troubled striker Stan Collymore will not be joining French side Montpellier, coach of the southern French club Michel Mezy said on Wednesday evening.

Collymore has already left for England after refusing to play in a practice match.

The 28-year-old had flown to France to discuss a potential move to the struggling First Division side but Montpellier boss Michel Mezy said the transfer was off. "I wanted him to take a test, he wanted to sign first."

The former England striker is now set for showdown talks with John Gregory but the Villa manager has made it clear that Collymore has no part in his future plans.

Collymore had insisted only on Tuesday he was looking forward to the chance to begin a new career abroad.

He had said: "Maybe it's a good time to go abroad and start afresh, a change of scenery."

"We come out here to look at the facilities and I'm showing willing regarding clubs, I think it's the right way to do it."

VIEIRA HAS NO PLANS TO COOL DOWN

LONDON: Arsenal's French midfielder Patrick Vieira vowed on Wednesday not to change his combative style on the pitch despite just returning from a seven-match ban.

The French World Cup winner believes that taking the aggression out of his game would rob him of his greatest qualities as he attempts to bring his side back into title contention.

Vieira may have started to learn his lesson following his ban for spitting at West Ham's Neil Ruddock and an altercation with a police