

2004 Nations Cup Egypt may play hosts

JOHANNESBURG, Jan 7: African Football Confederation officials must choose between Egypt and a joint bid from Benin and Togo when they meet in Ghana this month to decide the 2004 Nations Cup hosts, reports AFP.

Moroccan pair give Coventry a boost

LONDON, Jan 7: Coventry City received a boost on Thursday when Moroccan stars Mustapha Hadji and Youssef Chippo were given permission to fly back from the national team's African Nations Cup preparations to play in the English Premiership match with Wimbledon on January 15, reports AFP.

Carlos prefers the Brazilian colour

SAO PAULO, Brazil, Jan 7: Real Madrid's Brazilian international winger Roberto Carlos said Thursday that the FIFA World Cup Championship had its merits but nothing could beat playing for Brazil, reports AFP.

PSV for European Super League

EINDHOVEN, Netherlands, Jan 7: Leading Dutch club PSV Eindhoven would be prepared to quit their domestic championships in 2002 and join a proposed European Super League, according to media reports on Friday, reports AFP.

PSV for European Super League

Van Raaij said in his New Year address that the other two leading Dutch clubs, Feyenoord and Ajax, had also indicated interest in participating. Van Raaij concedes that the leagues in strong nations such as Italy, Spain, Germany and England would remain intact but that teams from leagues in which they are dominant forces would be keen to join the proposed new venture.



Vasco da Gama's Juninho and Felipe (white jerseys) threatening the South Melbourne goal during their World Club Championship clash in Rio de Janeiro on January 6. —AFP photo

Vasco owe Filipe, Edmundo



RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 7: Brazil's Vasco da Gama defeated Oceanian representatives South Melbourne of Australia 2-0 here Thursday to take control of Pool B in FIFA's inaugural World Club Championships, reports AFP.

be difficult for both of those teams to win because these Australians were very motivated. South Melbourne coach Ange Postecoglou was equally complimentary about the Brazilians and said: "I am not disappointed by the defeat. On the contrary I am very proud of the guys. They played with a lot of dignity and gave everything they had."

Vasco's two goals showed what this game was all about. They were world class goals, two jewels. There is no defensive system that can anticipate or prevent goals like that.

The first-half of the pairing of Edmundo and Romario did not appear to be paying dividends for the Brazilian side named after a legendary Portuguese explorer.

Both players are huge stars of Brazilian football but are also notorious for their love of Rio's riotous nightlife and fell foul with each other because a restaurant owned by Romario had an unflattering caricature of Edmundo on the toilet door.

Edmundo, dubbed 'the animal' for his hedonistic lifestyle, brought out a superb stop from South Melbourne goalkeeper Chris Jones after 24 minutes.

Beckham, Ferguson see red

Nexaca rattle United



RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 7: European champions Manchester United salvaged a 1-1 draw in an incident-packed Group B opener in Rio's legendary Maracana Stadium against Nexaca of Mexico in FIFA's inaugural World Club Championship, reports AFP.

United was expelled from the English FA Cup - football's oldest tournament - to attend this inaugural tournament, the first time clubs from all the world's continents have been pitted against each other.

Ferguson said: "I think maybe we deserved to win the game actually, but when you have 10 men and you're 1-0 down you have to be happy with a point."

United's miserable night was summed up when Ferguson was ordered out of his technical area for walking out of the area to complain about a decision to the fourth official.

The free-kick was awarded after a foul by United's Dutch defender Jaap Stam on Alex Aguinaga.

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Of Beckham's dismissal, Ferguson railed: "The reaction of the Mexican players got him sent off. The referee reacted to the Mexican players and that's disappointing."

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GROUP B TABLE

Table with 4 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points. Rows include Vasco da Gama (Bra), Manchester Utd (Eng), Nexaca (Mex), and South Melbourne (Aus).

Diego moved to sanatorium

PUNTA DEL ESTE, Uruguay, Jan 7: Uruguayan police on Thursday questioned the entourage of Argentinian football legend Diego Maradona after his latest brush with cocaine left him in an intensive care unit for an apparent overdose, reports AFP.

Maradona, initially admitted for hypertension and irregular heartbeat problems, left the private Cantegril Hospital intensive care unit Thursday afternoon.

Maradona's agent Guillermo Coppola was questioned earlier in the day as part of a judicial investigation into the affair, judicial sources told AFP.

Coppola arrived mid-morning at Maldonado near the spa town of Punta del Este as officials attempted to shed some light on the latest controversy to break over Argentina's 1986 World Cup-winning captain - and was immediately engulfed by reporters.

Seven members of Maradona's entourage were being questioned in all - six Argentines and a Uruguayan doctor.

Maldonado district police chief Maximino Costa Rocha earlier said cocaine had been detected in Maradona's first sample.

He said: "This positive sample is due to an excessive consumption of cocaine."

Nigeria, Arsenal fight over Kanu

LAGOS, Jan 7: African Footballer of the Year Nwankwo Kanu has been ordered to report to Nigeria's African Nations Cup training camp by Friday at the latest despite his English club Arsenal insisting that he must play a cup game this weekend, reports AFP.

"Kanu's release is not negotiable," said the secretary-general of Nigeria Football Association (NFA), Tijjani Yusuf.

Kanu as well as Celestine Babayaro of Chelsea have until Friday to join the Eagles in Spain. By that time we will be well within the FIFA rules that allows us to have the players 14 days before a major championship," he said.

"Arsene Wenger has held on to him for more than is necessary," said another Eagles coach Shuaibu Amodu.

Kanu himself told a local radio station monitored here that "as soon as Arsenal release me, I will join the team. Nigeria is my fatherland and I am always happy to play for the Eagles."

Nigeria has experienced difficulties getting its key players starting in top European teams in time for its build-up matches to the African Nations Cup, which it will co-host with Ghana from January 22.

It has asked both FIFA and the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to intervene. Nigeria will name its final squad for the championship on Tuesday ahead of CAF's January 12 deadline for all the 16 teams to do so.

Weah rebuffs Marseille approach

MARSEILLE, France, Jan 7: AC Milan's Liberian international striker George Weah has been approached by French First Division club Marseille - a move he has declined to go through, it was reported Thursday, reports AFP.

Weah's enormous salary at AC Milan was impossible for Marseille to match, the French club's sporting director Marcel Dib said, and the 33-year-old - a former FIFA World Player of the Year - is not likely to be the French top flight where he played for Monaco and Paris St Germain.

Marseille badly need a striker after the departure over the winter break of Italian Fabrizio Ravanelli to Lazio, Kaba Diawara to Paris St Germain and Christophe Dugary to Bordeaux.

Their Cot d'Ivoire international Ibrahim Bakayoko will miss several weeks of French First Division action as he represents his country in the African Nations Cup.

With Weah staying put, Inter Milan's Uruguayan striker Alvaro Recoba is now the top target for Marseille, who are having a dismal season. Their coach Bernard Casoni says avoiding relegation is his only aim.

Serie A

Inzaghi makes the difference



MILAN, Jan 7: Juventus were riding high at the top of the Serie A for the first time this season on Thursday after Filippo Inzaghi guided them to a 1-0 victory over Verona in their first match of 2000, reports AFP.

Lazio's shock 2-0 defeat to Venezia on Wednesday was followed by wins for all the other major challengers - with Inter Milan crushing Perugia 5-0, Roma beating Bari 3-1 and Parma and AC Milan both notching 1-0 victories.

Inzaghi, dubbed 'Super-Pippo' by the adoring Delle Alpi stadium crowd, struck in the 47th minute, steering the ball home from close-range after Gianluca Zambrotta had shredded the Verona defence with a run down the left.

Inzaghi's eighth goal of the season enabled his team to leapfrog over Lazio in the table despite a tough battle against their mid-table opponents.

With Juventus top on 32 points and Lazio second on 31, this season's championship is fully living up to its billing of being the toughest-ever - with just six points separating the top six clubs.

Parma stayed third (30pts) after beating Udinese. Marco Di Vaio got the winner soon after the re-start, knocking home a low cross from Diego Fuser.

Coach Alberto Malesani kept both feet on the ground, despite his team's rise from third from bottom at the start of October.

As Roma, meanwhile, had hat-trick hero Vincenzo Montella to thank for their win over Bari, Montella poached two goals before converting a penalty after Bari's Moroccan

defender Rachid Negrouz was sent off for a hand-ball in the area.

Montella, who arrived during the summer, added 10 been a few goals short since 1 joined Roma. But I'm alright now.

Like Bari, AC Milan also had to play with 10 men at Piacenza.

The champions had midfielder Demetrio Albertini sent off for a second bookable offence in the 29th minute but it didn't stop his teammates taking the lead minutes later.

Germany's Oliver Bierhoff catching the Piacenza defence napping as Brazilian Leonardo floated in a free-kick.

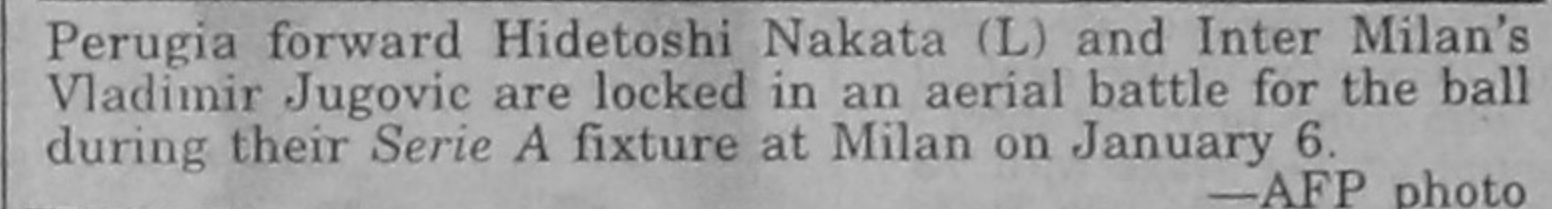
Milan coach Alberto Zaccaroni said: "We suffered. We were playing for a lot of the game with 10 men against a Piacenza side who never gave up."

But we showed great concentration and determination, qualities which at times we've lacked, and we're deservedly taking home three points."

Dutchman Clarence Seedorf made a dream debut for Inter Milan little more than a week after they paid Real Madrid 24 million dollars for the midfielder.

Greek wingback Grigoris Georgatos smacked them into a 18th-minute lead with a 22-metre shot after collecting a corner sent over by the Dutchman, who then went one better by scoring a superb goal in the 44th minute - beating two men before unleashing an angled shot.

Christian Vieri, the world's most expensive footballer at nearly 50 million dollars, headed home a Georgatos cross, Vladimir Jugovic added a fourth and Perugia defender Paulino Hilario ended the rout with an own goal.



Perugia forward Hidetoshi Nakata (L) and Inter Milan's Vladimir Jugovic are locked in an aerial battle for the ball during their Serie A fixture at Milan on January 6. —AFP photo

Beckham's 'bad boy' curse



PARIS, Jan 7: The sending-off and automatic suspension of David Beckham in Manchester United's 1-1 draw with Mexico's Necaxa in the World Club Championship Thursday has seen another reversal of fortune in the high-profile life of the maverick golden boy of English football, reports AFP.

At the turn of the Millennium it seemed that Beckham had finally banished memories of a disastrous 1998 that had made him such a pariah at one point in football-loving England that he had to bribe to leave the country.

A hugely successful 1999 had seen him finish as runner-up to Barcelona's Brazilian star Rivaldo in the vote for European player of the year and he is expected to dispute the title of FIFA World Player of the Year with the same player later this month although his red card in Rio de Janeiro's legendary Maracana arena may now give the Brazilian the edge.

But 2000 has started off with nothing but negative publicity both on and off the field for a man, who is arguably the biggest celebrity in Britain.

It is a measure of Beckham's huge media standing in his homeland that his wedding last year received much more attention than the nuptials of Prince Edward, Queen Elizabeth II's youngest son.

And he enjoys treatment worthy of a pop star abroad where his football achievements are as widely admired as they are at home but without the vitriolic abuse that has sometimes been directed against him by England's notoriously partisan football fans and equally uncharitable popular press.

He became a particular target for opposing supporters after another highly-publicised sending-off - this time in an England shirt - against Argentina in the 1998 World Cup.

Beckham petulantly kicked off at Argentina's Diego Simeone right in front of the referee who waved him on.

That little gaffe from his spouse will ensure that Beckham will be the recipient of more vile verbal abuse from opposing supporters in England, who traditionally delight in making life as uncomfortable as possible for opposing star players.

In Beckham's case hostile supporters have even composed obscene chants about his wife and child in a bid to provoke his volatile temper.

And his red card against Necaxa ensured he will miss the game with Rio outfit Vasco da Gama that will probably determine which Group B team qual-

ifies for the final.

The United fans, who have loyally backed their idol, are unlikely to scapegoat him in the same way that he was by fans of the national team after the World Cup sending-off.

And Beckham can count on the support of United manager Sir Alex Ferguson, whose superb man management of his prodigy was credited by many for keeping the player in England instead of a lucrative move abroad to Spain or Italy - his wife has frequently said she would like to live in a summer climate.

Ferguson has handled Beckham with discretion, limiting his media interviews.

Beckham has also shown commendable loyalty to the club. Even though he was born in Leytonstone, London he turned down rival offers in the English capital to join the northern side he had supported as a boy.

Typically after his red card in Rio, Ferguson fiercely defended Beckham, saying: "The reaction of the Mexican players got him sent off. The referee reacted to the Mexican players and that's disappointing."

Beckham has also been widely ridiculed for his high profile marriage and his sometimes idiosyncratic dress sense. Even before his wife's comments about his preference for her underwear he had been mocked for wearing a sarong in public.

That was nothing compared to the criticism of his lavish wedding in Dublin, derided as the height of bad taste by a media that was perhaps motivated by anger that they could get nowhere near the ceremony as the couple had sold exclusive rights to a magazine.

But photographs of the newly-weds sitting on purpose-built thrones and naked reclining golden figurines of the couple and their baby son on the wedding cake gave ample ammunition to the popular press.

Beckham proved in 1999 that he can withstand the fiercest onslaught by Britain's notoriously predatory tabloid newspapers. It is an experience that will stand him in good stead for the media storm that will inevitably follow his latest indiscretions.



SAME OLD STORY: (Left side) David Beckham (No 7) has just fouled Jose Milian of Nexaca. (Right) The Manchester United midfielder being shown the red card by referee Horacio Elizondo. —AFP photos