

Teddy's strike might prove decisive

LONDON, Jan 25 (Reuters/ternet). Teddy Sheringham is scored more glamorous goals in his time but his quality in a key English Premier League clash with Arsenal on Monday may turn out to be one of the most important moments of the season.

The experienced England international striker, who has fared with injury this season, scored vital goals in United's triumphs in both the FA Cup and European Cup finals last season.

But the substitute's close-range effort in the 73rd minute, which cancelled out a goal from Swedish striker Henrik Larsson, prevented Arsenal from making life difficult for the champions at the top of the table.

United were returning to league action after a 28-day ban during which they played the World Club Championship in Brazil. Arsenal went close to ending United their first league defeat at Old Trafford for more than a year.

But they were thwarted by a player who is not popular at Arsenal because he is used to playing for rival Tottenham Hotspur.

"When he came on he made an impact immediately and he offers something different, United coach Alex Ferguson said.

"He always scores important goals," Ferguson said. "He's a goal scorer."

The result left Leeds United top of the table with 47 points from 22 matches. Arsenal were second with 44 points from 22 and Arsenal third on 39 points from 23.

It would have been a major psychological boost for Arsenal which had beaten United in their return to domestic action. Now Ferguson's team have three games in hand over the 12th Londoners -- a possible 12 points.

"We are satisfied with the performance," Ferguson said. "It's a good start for us."

"It tells us about the strength of the challenge. The two teams saw tonight will definitely fight out the title this year."

But talking about Leeds, he added: "When you are up there it's a big responsibility to keep going you must have a plan."

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger would have settled for a point before the game. But after watching his team very close to scoring another goal -- United goalkeeper Mark Schuster made a superb save in the 90th minute.

"We knew it was important to score," Wenger said. "Before the game I would have set myself a goal but afterwards I've some regrets."

"I wouldn't want to tarnish the quality of our performance but we could have gone 2-0 ahead on two occasions at least."

Wenger conceded the fate of the championship will be decided by how United perform in their matches in hand. "If United win their three games, nobody will catch them," he said. "At this moment it is very difficult to say what will happen and we just have to keep going out and trying to win."

China blank Guam

HO CHI MINH CITY, Jan 26. Shenghao scored five goals all in the second half -- and to Haidong added four more to lead China to a 9-0 win over Guam in the quarter-final of the Asian Cup soccer tournament, reports AP.

With Ngo Quang Trung scoring two second-half goals to make open a close game, Vietnam beat the Philippines 3-0 in the day's second match to equal China's 2-0 record in the round-robin competition.

The leaders meet Saturday night with China -- ahead on all differentials -- needing only two points to become the sixth team to advance to Asian Cup in Hanoi later this year.

It was unclear if China's goal position was a record. FIFA, soccer's world organizing body, has the highest score for a FA Cup competition came when England beat the Philippines 17-0 in a run-up to World Cup '98, but it is unsure about records for global competitions. Calls to Asian Football Confederation headquarters went unanswered.

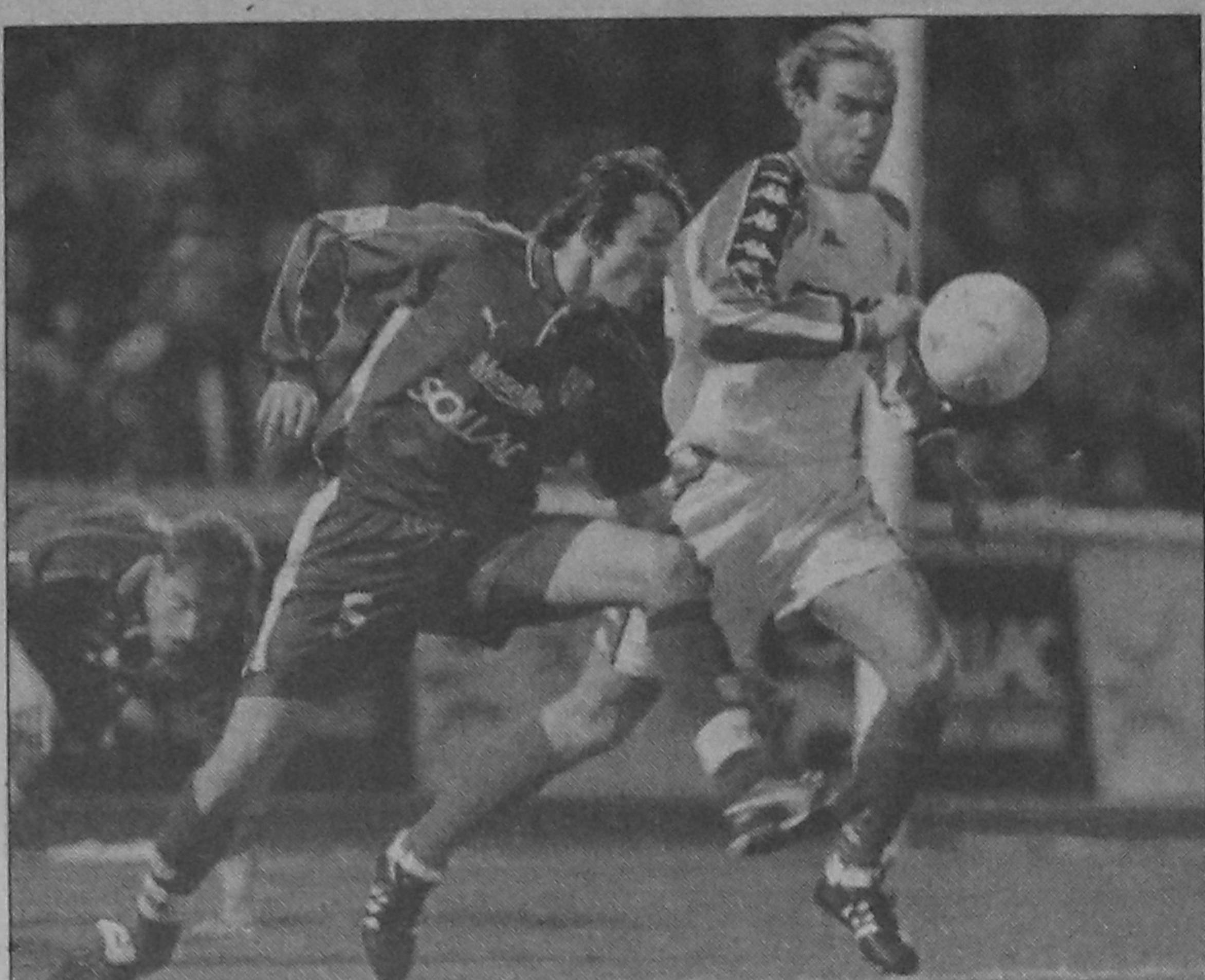
Su Maozhen had three goals, giving him eight in China's first 10 matches. Yao Xia added a brace of goals, while Ma Ningyu, Li Weifeng, Li Sheng and Qiu Hong each had one.

China beat the Philippines 3-0 on Sunday, letting up in the second half, but Vietnam took an early goal differential advantage with an 11-0 rout of Guam.

This time, the Chinese kept the pressure on.

Hao scored in the second minute as China raced to a 6-0 lead at intermission then added goals in the second half. Qiu's burst in the period made it the third player to score three goals in the first three matches of the round-robin competition.

The rapidly pro-Vietnam crowd, arriving early for the second match, cheered loudly at the few occasions Guam penetrated midfield. Lee Belevins, a Vietnam native, was the man to take the goal for Vietnam, the next-to-last in the most recent FIFA rankings of the world's 202 national teams.



Dado Prso (R) of Monaco and Metz's Sylvain Kastendeuch battle for possession during their French First Division encounter at Metz on January 25. —Internet photo

French First Division

Metz hold Monaco

PARIS, Jan 26. Monaco drew 1-1 at Metz to increase their lead to 11 points at the top of the French championship.

The chasing pack could make inroads into that advantage on Wednesday night, reports AFP. Monaco, who have made blistering starts in recent matches to score in the first quarter-hour, went a goal down to Metz's winter-break signing Gerald Batlle after 59 minutes.

Italy's Marco Simone hit a 65th-minute equalizer to salvage a point, giving them 49 points from 22 matches. Metz coach Claude Puel may rue a missed opportunity when Paris Saint Germain's Auxerre and Lyon, who have 38 points, play on Wednesday.

"A draw was a fair reflection of the game," Metz coach Joel Muller said after the match. "We did well for an hour but 1-1 was the right result."

Monaco could consider it was a good night's work as they were without injured players David Trezeguet, Marcelo Gal-

lardo and Philippe Christanval, and were playing on an icy pitch rarely seen down in the principality.

Simone, who equalized Batlle's opener following a good cross from Sabri Lamouchi on the right, hit his 16th goal of the season to leave him on top of the league scoring list.

Monaco might even have won the match as they dominated towards the end though it was only thanks to their in-form keeper Fabien Barthez that they did not go behind in the first half.

Monaco did not manage their usual quickfire start to matches so far in 2000. They were 3-0 up against Troyes after 12 minutes and 2-0 up against Rennes after 17 minutes.

Marseille have been through the wars in recent weeks as their coach Bernard Casoni, who succeeded Roland Courbis, began a new regime, but they managed a 2-1 win at Troyes.

Robert Pires scored for Marseille in the fifth minute. Jerome Monier equalized three minutes before the break before new striker Cyrille Pouget hit the winner at the Stade de

l'Aube with half an hour left.

Some 17,000 spectators saw Marseille win their first match in seven weeks and the side was hardly timid in coming out of their shell from the whistle.

Stephane Dalmat, fed by Sebastien Perez, got through the Troyes defence and fired over a perfect cross for Pires, positioned on the penalty spot, who easily shot past keeper Tony Heurtebis.

Troyes hit back with chances further troubled Marseille but it was the visiting side which earned the winner. Great work from Dalmat down the left preceded a cross leaving Pouget to chest the ball down and fire it into the net with ease.

Jerome Monier, superbly fed by Luciano Zavgano, then made easy work of Patrick Blondeau and Franek Dumas before firing home for the equalizer.

David Hamed and a Zavgano header further troubled Marseille but it was the visiting side which earned the winner. Great work from Dalmat down the left preceded a cross leaving Pouget to chest the ball down and fire it into the net with ease.

English League Cup Villa and Leicester all-square

BIRMINGHAM, England, Jan 26. Aston Villa and Leicester still have it all to play for after parting goalless in the English League Cup semi-final, 1st leg at Villa Park on Tuesday, reports AFP.

Leicester keeper Tim Flowers kept the visitors in the running for a place in the final by producing a top-class save from Aston Villa skipper Gareth Southgate in one of few highlights of a disappointing encounter.

Flowers had performed heroics last Wednesday to earn the Foxes victory over Arsenal in an FA Cup penalty shootout.

And the former Blackburn player was again in stunning form to somehow keep out a perfectly struck volley from Southgate midway through the second period.

Most of the match saw the two sides cancel each other out as the midfield became congested and sparks of creativity were few and far between.

Villa did most of the pressing in the second period with Paul Merson increasingly influential when he reverted to his midfield role.

Barca boss all for Rivaldo

BARCELONA, Jan 26 (Reuters/Internet). Barcelona president Josep Lluís Nunez sent out a clear message of support to Rivaldo on Wednesday, saying he wants the World and European Player of the Year to see out his career at the club.

Rivaldo has been the subject of persistent rumours linking him with a move to Italy, and he asked Barcelona publicly to remain at the club after picking up the FIFA World Player award in Brussels on Monday.

Nunez has now responded, telling Barcelona newspaper La Vanguardia he is delighted that Rivaldo wants to stay.

"To hear Rivaldo saying he is happy at Barcelona is the best possible news for all Barcelona fans," Nunez said.

The day we signed Rivaldo was a big gamble. Because of that there's nothing that gives me greater satisfaction than to hear that he wants to play out his career at this club.

"That's my desire as well, that when he comes to the end of his current contract he signs another one and stays with us for the remainder of his career."

Platini feels Zidane is vintage

MILAN, Jan 26 (Reuters/Internet). Former France and Juventus midfielder Michel Platini has paid tribute to his compatriot and current Juventus star Zinedine Zidane, describing him as one of the last genuine playmakers in modern football.

Zidane's excellent club form in recent weeks culminated in an exquisite goal in his side's 2-0 win away to Reggina on Sunday when he danced past three defenders before blasting a shot into the roof of the net.

After injury problems last season, the 1998 European and World Player of the Year finally looks back to the kind of form that earned him those honours and helped France to win the World Cup.

"Zidane is a player out of his time, something from the old days," Platini told the daily Gazzetta dello Sport in an interview published on Tuesday.

"He is a fine number 10 and there are no more of those because most of the modern coaches prefer collective organisation to using a classic playmaker. They have destroyed this role and lots of players who stop them from inspiration from this role. The result is they get a poorer spectacle."

Platini believes Zidane could be the man to revive the dying species of the playmaker. "People who love football have to be happy about the success of Zidane because his example gives credibility to the position of the number 10 and gives new life to a breed of players who are becoming extinct."

Olympic qualifiers Uruguay first into final group

CASCABEL, Brazil Jan 26: Uruguay became the first side to book a berth in the final group in the South American Olympic Games qualifiers here Tuesday when they defeated Paraguay 1-0.

The Group B match was decided when defender Alejandro Melono moved forward in the 13th minute to score the only goal of the game.

That gave the Uruguayans a maximum nine points out of three games ensuring them a place in the final group which will oppose the top two teams from the two initial five-team qualifying groups.

The two teams which finish top of the final group go through to the Sydney Olympic Games tournament.

Uruguay play their final Group B match Saturday against Argentina, who kept their hopes alive Tuesday with a 2-0 win over winless Bolivia.

Both goals came in the second half through Bernardo Romeo (66) and Roman Riquelme (90-penalty).

Argentina have seven points from their three games and a draw would be enough to see them through to Sunday when they would have to score a big win over Bolivia in their last match to stand any chance.

Chile leads group A with seven points from three matches ahead of Colombia and Brazil who both have four points from two matches.

African Nations Cup

Morocco owe Bassir one



Lagos, Jan 26. The expected mismatch of the African Nations Cup almost made a mockery of

football hierarchy on the continent as mighty Morocco snatched a 1-0 Group D victory over no-hopers Congo Tuesday, while in Group C, Senegal overcame Burkina Faso 3-1, reports AFP.

MOROCCO-CONGO. It took the 1998 World Cup finalists 84 minutes to break through and the goal came from Salaheddine Bassir, a striker based in Spain who had been on the field just a few minutes.

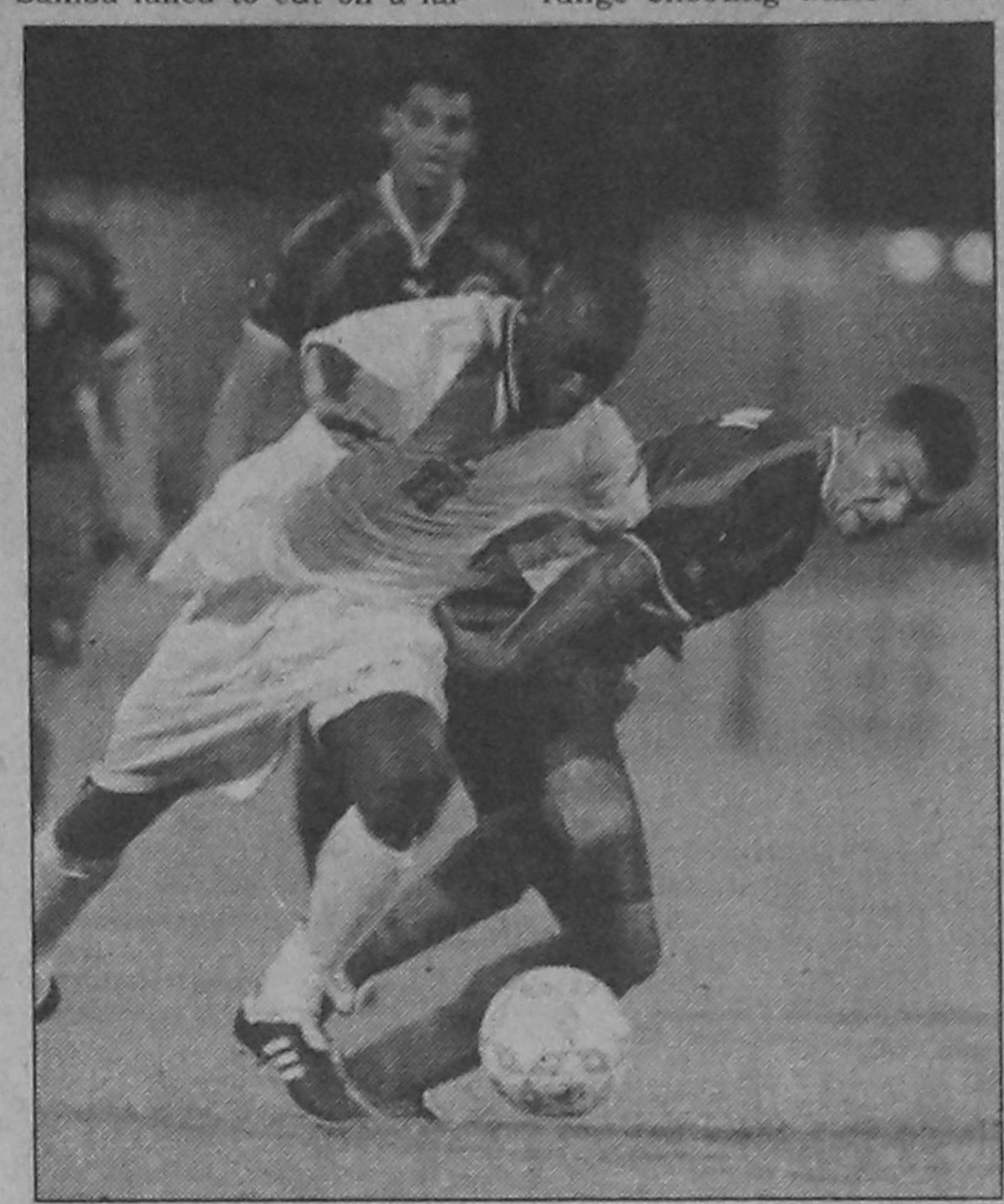
Congo goalkeeper Brice Samba failed to cut off a far-

post cross from Youssef Chippo and former African Footballer of the Year Mustapha Hadji steered the ball into the path of Bassir, who knocked it over the line.

It was a heartbreaking end for the Congolese Red Devils, who first contained and then matched opponents sporting a line-up packed with Europe-based professionals.

Morocco never looked like a team rated number one in Africa by world controlling body FIFA and Congo, the lowest ranked of the 16 Nations Cup finalists, quickly won over neutral supporters.

The increasingly-anxious Moroccans resorted to long-range shooting while a Con-



Oscar C. Ewolo(L) of Congo trying to get the better of Morocco's Abdeljilil Hadda during their African Nations Cup fixture at Lagos on January 25. —Internet photo

golese side consisting mainly of players with lower-league clubs in Europe, created several openings only to be let down by wild shooting.

Nigeria, who are hosting the biennial African football showcase with Ghana, lead the group on goal difference from Morocco. Tunisia are the other country in a mini-league labelled the Group of Death.

Lagos is notorious for power cuts and the match was less than three minutes old when Surulere Stadium, venue of the February 13 final, was plunged into darkness.

It took 15 minutes before play resumed and Morocco almost took the lead when a swerving free kick from Youssef MARIANA, the sole home-based player, forced late-reacting Samba to concede a corner.

The longer Congo held Morocco the more confident they became and a dazzling run by Rolf Gule-Mien from German club Eintracht Frankfurt forced Abdellillah Saber to concede a corner.

Lethargic Morocco had equally little to offer in the second half apart from a Hadji shot that Samba held comfortably and a Said Chiba header off a corner that just missed the target.

SENEGAL-BURKINA FASO. Senegal went to the top of Group C on goal difference from holders Egypt in the northern Nigerian city of Kano with a 3-1 victory over 1998 surprise packets Burkina Faso.

Although the physically-formidable Lions always looked the more polished team it took a 85th-minute goal from substitute Salif Keita to finish off the energetic Stallions.

Ousmane Diop and Papa Sarr struck early and late in the opening half and Ousmane Sanou reduced arrears for Burkina Faso, who came fourth behind Egypt, South Africa and Democratic Republic of Congo when they hosted the 1998 event.

Wednesday is a rest day in the three-week championship and action resumes Thursday afternoon with Ghana facing Togo in Accra and South Africa meeting DR Congo in Kumasi.

Ghana better be aware of Togo



ACCRA, Jan 26. Co-hosts Ghana will be particularly wary of minutes Togo when the West African neighbours clash Thursday in a crucial African Nations Cup Group A match, reports AFP.

Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo have one point each and identical goal differences after the first series of matches in a pool rated the second strongest after the Group of Death featuring Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia.

The early results did not conform to the pre-tournament script, as fancied Ghana were lucky to escape with a 1-1 draw against a Cameroon side that spurned several simple scoring chances.

An even bigger surprise was provided by Togo, who shrugged off the absence of leading player Bachirou Salou from German club Eintracht Frankfurt to hold 1992 champions Cote

d'Ivoire. Togo recovered superbly from a terrible opening spell in which they rarely managed to retain possession for more than a few seconds and were deprived of a deserved victory only by brilliant goalkeeping from Alain Gouamane.

There are conflicting reports regarding Salou, with German coach Gottlieb Goller saying he was unlikely to face the Black Stars while captain and brother Tadjou Salou told reporters he would be in the starting line-up.

The presence of Bachirou, whose build resembles that of All Blacks rugby star Jonah Lomu, would provide much needed support for the equally physical Abdelkader Coubadja.

Midfielder Lantame Oudja, from Swiss club Servette, was one of many Togolese heroes against the Ivorians and his duels with Ghana captain Charles Akunnon could have a significant bearing on the result.

Ghana, rated second

favourites behind Nigeria for the title, were almost too bad to be true against Cameroon with the defence repeatedly ripped apart, no cohesion in midfield and only Kwame Ayew posing a threat up front.

Giuseppe Dossena, a member of the 1982 Italy World Cup-winning team and the man charged with guiding the Black Stars to a record fifth title and their first in 18 years, remains calm under media pressure.

The Nations Cup is a marathon rather than a sprint and while Nigeria may have confirmed their position as favourites with a dazzling second-half showing against Tunisia, the Super Eagles face five more increasingly difficult obstacles.

Togo, who shocked Ghana 2-1 in the 1998 finals with Coubadja scoring the late winner, will once again start as underdogs before an expected capacity 40,000 crowd at the National Stadium.

Quarters spot beckons SA



KUMASI, Ghana, Jan 26: South Africa will become the first team to reach the African Nations Cup quarter-

finals if they defeat the Democratic Republic of Congo Thursday in a Group B match, reports AFP.

Bafana Bafana (The Boys) are favoured after an ultimately convincing 3-1 victory over Gabon in their first mini-league match last weekend, while the Congolese were lucky to escape with a 0-0 draw against Algeria. Tradition also suggests success

for one of the sides considered capable of winning the biennial African football showcase being hosted by Ghana and Nigeria.

South Africa defeated DR Congo twice in qualifiers for the 1998 World Cup and triumphed again in the previous Nations Cup semi-finals through an extra-time goal from player-of-the-tournament Benni McCarthy.

The young striker was not considered for the latest edition after retiring from international football last September to concentrate on his career with Spanish club Celta Vigo.

Benni changed his mind after the Nations Cup squad was chosen, but coach Trott Moloto, arguably the smartest dresser in the central Ghanaian city, stood by his original selections.

They gave the former schoolteacher from the northern town of Pietersburg a jolt by conceding an early goal against Gabon, who exposed the defensive frailty of the Bafana right flank.

But a couple of superbly-flighted free kicks from Manchester United reserve Quinton Fortune set up goals for Dumisa Ngobane and Shaun Bartlett, who added a victory-clinching third near the end.

Italian Cup quarter-final 2nd leg

Cagliari knock Roma out

CAGLIARI, Sardinia, Jan 26: Grumbling AS Roma coach Fabio Capello claimed his team were beaten by an own goal and a lucky strike after an embarrassing Italian Cup exit to lowly Cagliari, reports AFP.

Cagliari won Tuesday night's quarter-final second leg here 1-0 with what was universally described as a superbly-worked goal by their Uruguayan midfielder Fabian O'Neill.

The Sardinian underdogs had also won the first leg in Rome 1-0, thanks to a header attributed to Belgian international Luis Oliveira after an aerial challenge with Roma's Brazilian defender Cafu.

But Capello, who is known for his tough, authoritarian

management style, was in a begrudging mood after their latest defeat.

"We tried to win and we didn't manage it," he told reporters here. "In the end, we've been knocked out by an own goal and a shot that went wrong, wasn't hit properly but still finished up in the top corner."

"But that's football. Roma tried everything to win and created a lot of problems for their opponents, who had to keep changing around."

He later admitted though: "If Cagliari scored two goals over the 180 minutes, then that means they deserved to go through."

Club president Franco Sensi was sanguine about his team's failure to reach the semi-finals, saying: "We didn't play very well, and as a result, we didn't achieve our objective."

Roma had also lost their first leg tie 1-0 in the previous round but then went on to trounce Piacenza 3-0 in the away match.

"I have to say that I'd hoped we could turn it around again like we did at Piacenza. But that's the way it went," Sensi said.

"We're out mainly because of that goal, a lucky one at that, which we conceded at the Olympic stadium."

"No-one enjoys losing and in the heat of the moment, it is a big disappointment. But looking at it coolly, the Italian Cup was not one of our major objectives."

Cagliari, who are joint bottom on points of the Serie A -- where Roma are third, now meet the winners of Thursday's Milan derby between AC and Inter for a slot in the final.

Baggio, Boban's plea

MILAN, Jan 26: Two of Italy's top playmakers have sounded a rallying cry this week, with AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban and Inter's Roberto Baggio demanding more respect and

remark Zaccaroni made last weekend. Milan were 2-0 down to Lecce when Boban went on in the 60th minute, but they ended up with a 2-2 draw and the Croatian hit the post with a late free-kick.

But the coach claimed that another substitute, Massimo Ambrosini, had done as much. "It was as if he couldn't bear to hear people talking about me," Boban told reporters at the Milan training ground.

"But I'm not the one who's claiming to be the national saviour," he added, before revealing a clearing of the air session with Zaccaroni.

"I asked him for respect, because I have always behaved properly and because I think I deserve to be respected -- for how I am playing now and for how hard I have always worked," Boban said.

Life has not been much easier for Baggio, now back in the limelight after scoring the winner in Sunday's 2-1 victory at Verona.

Baggio has been passed over by coach Marcello Lippi this season and he seemed destined to leave after a public row with

him last month.

And like Boban, he has had to insist that he is fit enough to play.

"No, it wouldn't be right to talk about me making my latest resurrection - I'm never dead," Baggio quipped at Inter's training base.

"Every time I've had to prove myself, I've handled it. I've never given up. Because people who don't fight, don't achieve anything in life."

As for the prospect of more appearances, he said: "I hope so... if I'm dropped for a technical reason, that's not a problem. The important thing is for people to be sincere with one another."



BAGGIO

Inter's Roberto Baggio asking for more chances to play, reports AFP.

The creative number 10 role in Italian football has enabled the likes of Juventus' Zinedine Zidane and AS Roma's Francesco Totti to make headlines in recent weeks with a series of inspired performances.

However, fate has not been so kind to their two counterparts in Milan.

Milan coach Alberto Zaccaroni prefers a three-man attack which leaves no room for a playmaker -- even though Boban was the key to Milan's successful title challenge at the end of last season.

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BOBAN

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CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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Yesterday's Cryptiquip: SPIRITED
ADOLESCENT ATHLETES WILL CHOOSE FOODS
WITH A LOT OF PRO-TEEN.
Today's Cryptiquip Clue: U equals R
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 that and more.