

Ronaldo back in training

MILAN, Feb 15 (Reuters/Internet): Brazil striker Ronaldo has returned to training for the first time since a knee operation in November, his club Inter Milan said on Tuesday.

An Inter spokesman said Ronaldo began a programme of light individual training at the club's Appiano Gentile training complex on Monday.

His recovery from the operation is going according to plan and he has started the second phase of recuperation, said the spokesman. "He started on Monday with some slow running and the training will gradually intensify".

The spokesman added that Ronaldo was expected to begin full training with the rest of the squad in the first week of March.

A month after that the club hoped he would be ready to return to action in Serie A for the first time since he damaged his knee against Lecce on November 21.

"We hope that he will be ready to play in the first week of April," said the spokesman. "That is the plan and at the moment everything is going according to the plan".

Wright points at 'reptile' fans

GLASGOW, Feb 15 (Reuters/Internet): Former England striker Ian Wright has labelled a minority of Celtic's fans reptiles for covering his car in spit after the club's humiliating Scottish Cup defeat by Inverness Caledonian Thistle.

Wright, who has been released after only four months at the club, told The Sun tabloid on Tuesday: "It was stone age stuff from reptiles."

Celtic have also placed Scotland goalkeeper Jonathan Gould on the transfer list in the wake of the club's 3-1 defeat by Inverness last week.

Former Arsenal striker Wright is moving to English second division Burnley. He joined Celtic as cover after Henrik Larsson suffered a broken leg but scored only three goals in 10 appearances.

He made his decision to move on after Celtic director of football Kenny Dalglish said he could not guarantee him first-team football.

Wright told The Sun: "I don't regret a minute of my time at Celtic and it was an honour to play for the club. But the Inverness result was devastating and nothing could prepare me for what happened after the game."

Some so-called fans, a few morons who know nothing better, covered my car in spit. They were shouting obscenities at myself and Regi Blinker.

"They were screaming at me to get back to London... and that I didn't deserve to wear their colours. It was stone age stuff from reptiles."

Gould was dropped for last Saturday's premier league match against Dundee by Dalglish, currently in charge of the team after the sacking of John Barnes.

He met Dalglish on Monday for talks and it was agreed by mutual consent he would move on. Gould had been told he would be relegated to number three behind former Chelsea goalkeeper Dmitri Khariin and Stewart Kerr.

"Leaving Celtic is the hardest decision I have ever had to make in life but it is difficult to drop down to third choice after being number one for so long," Gould said.

Gould insisted he was not being punished by Dalglish after it was alleged he had leaked details of a dressing room row during the Inverness game to a newspaper.

"That was never said by Kenny in our meeting and my not playing against Dundee was a football decision. I might not agree but I respect his right to make that decision."

Cragnotti very upset

ROME, Feb 15: Lazio boss Sergio Cragnotti called on Monday for Italy to introduce professional referees, claiming that whistle-blowers here had been left behind in the big-money world of the Serie A, reports AFP.

Referees in Italy have regular day jobs, albeit with employers who allow them to leave for courses and training camps. They are paid fees for individual matches, plus a refund of travel and hotel expenses.

But a day after Lazio were denied what seemed a clear penalty in their 0-0 draw with Parma, the latest in a series of penalty appeals to go against the club recently, Cragnotti called for a change.

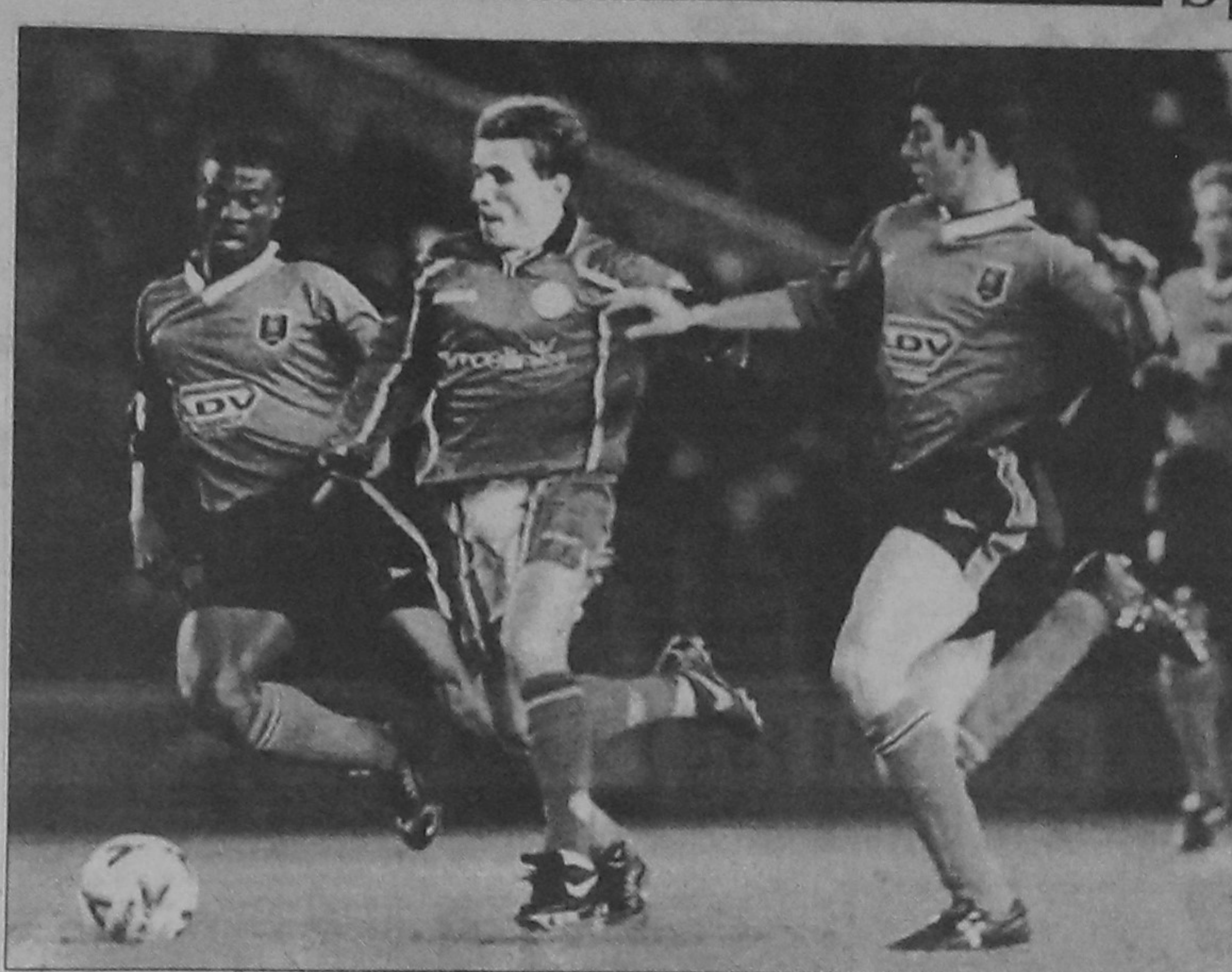
Asked about the referee's decision, Cragnotti told reporters: "Perhaps it's just one of those things. I've always believed in people's good faith."

But these continuing repetitions are making me think: there's something that needs to be looked at again and corrected."

Looking ahead, the man who made Lazio the first Italian club to be quoted on the stock exchange said: "Football clubs have become powerful and important, especially in terms of their capitalisation."

"They are made up of great players, who are able to generate substantial revenues... but the institutions who govern football are lagging seriously behind and this gap should be made up as soon as possible."

Refereeing as an example. Every area of the game is heading for greater specialisation and the referees should adapt accordingly, and find a way of being autonomous."



Middlesbrough's Brazilian star Juninho (C) makes his way through two Aston Villa defenders during their Premiership clash at Riverside Stadium on February 14. — AFP photo

Racism strikes Serie A again

MILAN, Feb 15: Black footballers have once again become the target of racist abuse in the Serie A, with Lazio fans demonstrating that years of anti-racist initiatives in Italy have come to nothing, reports AFP.

Lazio are heading for more trouble from soccer officials this week after 'ultras' at the north end of the Olympic stadium booed whenever one of Parma's black players touched the ball in Sunday night's 0-0 draw.

Frenchmen Lilian Thuram and Ousmane Dabo, along with Ivory Coast-born Salisu Sissoko were the targets — just two days after Lazio were fined 2,500 dollars for the same abuse handed out to Venezia's black French defender Bruno N'Gotty in an Italian Cup semifinal last week.

Fingers were being pointed at the hard-core Lazio supporters, known as the "Irriducibili" ('unshakables'). The same fans caused a storm in Italy recently by unravelling a banner in praise of murdered Serbian warlord Zeljko Raznatovic, better known as Arkan, leader of a feared militia, the Tigers.

Arkan was wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the time of his death. The slogan "Honour to the tiger Arkan" — unshakable like us — led to a ban, enforced by police at the entrances to football grounds, on any flag or banner with a racist message.

However, that success has now been offset by the more difficult problem of taunts and abuse being shouted by fans at one end of a stadium that can hold up to 80,000 people. And although the problem

has been brought to a head by Lazio fans, they are not alone. Just hours after Thuram and his teammates were taken to task, the same treatment had been reserved for another black French player, Perugia's Ibrahim Ba, taunted by Roma fans in a 2-2 draw.

As in other European countries, the link between racism at soccer grounds and the extreme right in politics is a short one.

Far from being a closet organisation, the "Irriducibili" have their own official Website ("www.irriducibili-lazio.com") and a guided 'virtual' tour of their headquarters.

Among the flags adorning the walls are those with the Celtic-styled cross, a symbol associated with neo-Fascists in Italy since the 1970s.

Such flags, along with swastikas, have not been uncommon sights at the Olympic stadium in recent seasons — particularly during derby matches.

Lazio's official name is SS Lazio, standing for "societa sportiva", and in games against AS Roma, whose supporters include a section of the capital's Jewish community, the initials are used by some Lazio fans in the typeface as the Nazi SS.

Thuram and Ba may be the latest to suffer, but they are not the first and are unlikely to be the last.

Former England captain Paul Ince was an occasional target when he played for Inter Milan, as was France's Marcel Desailly, now at Chelsea but previously at AC Milan.

Soccer officials have responded in the past with T-shirt campaigns, along the lines of 'Let's kick racism out of football', though their effects have usually been temporary.

Another aspect is that some people deny there is a problem

in the first place. National coach and 1982 World Cup winner Dino Zoff, one of the most respected men in the Italian game, poured water on the issue last Friday when asked to comment about N'Gotty's treatment.

"I don't know whether you could really call this racism," he told state television. "I think it could just be a question of people making fun of someone."

"It's something that happens at football stadiums — fans tick on a particular player because he's short, or because he's tall or because he's got grey hair," said Zoff, a former Lazio president.

A similar line was taken by Lazio's Chilean striker Marcelo Salas, who told reporters: "I'm against any form of racism, particularly against foreign players. But I think the shouts (boos) that you hear at the stadium are just a joke."

As a club, Lazio have appealed to their fans to stop the harassment. So far, in vain.

Sporting director Felice Pulici urged them on Friday: "This booing absolutely has to stop. Having forbidden the use of certain banners and Celtic crosses — fans have to realise, they shouldn't behave this way. I hope it doesn't happen again on Sunday."

Club president and owner Sergio Cragnotti said: "I am ashamed at fans like these, who make racism their banner. I don't want them at the stadium."

Underlining the issue on Monday, the Corriere della Sera condemned not only the racism, but also the "superficiality" of Zoff's position.

For him, the boos are not racism but just making fun," it said. "It's a shame that he didn't explain why, in Italian football grounds, the only ones who are made fun of nowadays are black players."

friendly games with Yugoslav teams as a part of their training for next season's defence of their title.

Shandong, coached by former Yugoslav selector Slobodan Santrac, will play their first friendly on Wednesday with Red Star Belgrade, Branko Bulatovic of the Yugoslav Football Union said.

Yugoslav are scheduled to meet China on February 28 as a part of the Yugoslav selection's preparations for Euro 2000.

The Yugoslavs will play their first friendly with Macedonia in Skopje on February 23.

But Bordeaux's away record this season is desperate, a win against strugglers Nantes the only time they've picked up maximum points on their travels.

With Monaco boasting an unblemished record at their principality stronghold all the signs point to Claude Puel's men getting back on the winning trail after that shock 2-1 defeat at Lyon on their last league outing.

But Bordeaux can cling to a possible upturn in form, arriving here on the back of their 3-0 thrashing of Strasbourg.

They can also take heart from the expected absence of Monaco's Argentine playmaker Marcello Gallardo.

Auxerre, who only escaped relegation on the final day last season, have a more than even money chance of leapfrogging Paris St Germain in the race for second behind the runaway leaders.

Auxerre host Strasbourg Wednesday night, with Paris St Germain, level on points with Gu Roux's team but with a better goal difference, away to Marseille, knocked out of the French Cup on Saturday on Tuesday night. The second Tuesday game is between Nantes and Lyon.

Wednesday's fixtures: Monaco v Bordeaux, Auxerre v Strasbourg, Lens v Bastia, St Etienne v Montpellier, Nancy v Metz, Sedan v Rennes and Le Havre v Troyes.

Chinese champs IN YUGOSLAVIA BELGRADE: Chinese football champions Shandong arrived here late Monday for six

Premiership Villa bury Boro

LONDON, Feb 15: Former England midfielder Paul Gascoigne was carried off with a broken arm as his Middlesbrough team were thrashed 4-0 at home by Aston Villa in the English Premier League yesterday, reports Reuters.

Gascoigne, whose career has been plagued by injuries, was hurt shortly before halftime and went to hospital. He was taken off in tears after starting his first game in two months.

The result lifted Villa to seventh while Middlesbrough remained struggling in 16th.

Benito Carbone, who has said he is ready to discuss a new deal to stay at Villa Park after his contract runs out at the end of the season, opened the scoring with a thunderous shot in the 11th minute after a defensive mix-up.

The Italian doubled Villa's lead just after the hour and Julian Joachim made it 3-0 in the 70th minute with a simple tap-in.

Joachim grabbed his second of the night five minutes later with a powerful header past Boro goalkeeper Marlon Beresford.

Star studded Brazil to meet Thailand

RIO DE JANEIRO, Feb 15: Brazil named a strong 18-man squad on Monday to face Thailand in a friendly international on February 23 in Bangkok, reports AFP.

Coach Wanderley Luxemburgo included several star names from overseas, including Barcelona ace Rivaldo and Real Madrid star Roberto Carlos in his travelling party.

SQUAD

Dida (Corinthians), Marcos (Palmeiras), Ronaldinho (Gremio), Claudio Cacapa (Atletico-MG), Roque Junior (Palmeiras), Athirson (Flamengo), Marcos Paulo (Cruzeiro), Fabiano (Sao Paulo), Juninho (Vasco da Gama), Cafu (Roma/Ita), Fabio Bilica (Venezia/Ita), Evanilson (Borussia Dortmund/Ger), Emerson and Ze Roberto (both Bayer Leverkusen/Ger), Giovanni Elber (Bayern Munich/Ger), Mario Jardel (Oporto/Port), Roberto Carlos (Real Madrid/Spa), Rivaldo (Barcelona/Spa).

Presidential escort for heroes

YAOUNDE, Feb 15: Presidential guards escorted Cameroon's news soccer champions home, apparently fearing revenge attacks by angry Nigerian soccer fans whose team lost the African Cup in Lagos, reports AP.

Cameroon's President Paul Biya dispatched the delegation of soldiers and officials, led by a traditional chief, just hours after Cameroon's indomitable Lions beat Nigeria 4-3 on penalty kicks after a 2-2 regulation tie on Sunday. Cameroon state radio reported Monday.

No reason was given for the move, although local journalists said Cameroonian officials and players feared a backlash by mobs of Nigerians.

Nigeria and Cameroon have a fierce soccer rivalry and violent incidents at club and international matches in both countries are not unusual.

The West African nations have had tense diplomatic relations over the years stemming from army clashes in the oil-rich Bakassi peninsula. At least 87 people have died in the fighting since 1994. Both countries claim sovereignty over the peninsula.

Yet on Monday, there was no reports of soccer-related violence in either country.

The Cameroonian team arrived at the airport in the capital, Yaounde, early Monday to a rousing welcome from crowds of supporters.

Elsewhere in the city, tens of thousands filled the streets as taxis careened past with fans sprawled across the top, waving flags and singing.

Biya, who marked his 67th birthday on Sunday, declared Monday a national holiday to celebrate the championship win.

The Cup had earlier been marred by violence during Nigerian games against Republic of Congo and Senegal.

WTA's top 20

ST PETERSBURG, Florida, Feb 15: Top 20 women's tennis players according to WTA Tour rankings (number in parenthesis is previous week's ranking):

Player	Points
1 (1) Martina Hingis (Switzerland)	5,734
2 (2) Lindsay Davenport (US)	5,190
3 (3) Venus Williams (US)	4,109
4 (4) Serena Williams (US)	3,231
5 (6) Nathalie Tauziat (France)	2,550
6 (5) Mary Pierce (France)	2,467
7 (8) Julie Halard-Decugis (France)	2,025
8 (7) Conchita Martinez (Spain)	1,981
9 (11) Anna Kournikova (Russia)	1,908
10 (9) Sandrine Testud (France)	1,843
11 (10) Barbara Schett (Austria)	1,834
12 (12) Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario (Spain)	1,768
13 (13) Monica Seles (US)	1,713
14 (14) Amel Mauresmo (France)	1,660
15 (15) Elena Likovtseva (Russia)	1,563
16 (16) Jennifer Kapriat (US)	1,557
17 (17) Amanda Coetzer (South Africa)	1,487
18 (19) Anke Huber (Germany)	1,458
19 (18) Dominique Van Roost (Belgium)	1,388
20 (20) Ai Sugiyama (Japan)	1,256

Lions have not lost their claws

Lagos, Feb 15 (Reuters): Cameroon are back with a vengeance after ending years in the doldrums with their African Nations Cup final victory over Nigeria in a penalty shoot-out.

That achievement has finally persuaded Cameroon's players they can fulfill the promise they showed ten years ago.

The indomitable Lions have flattered to deceive since 1990, when the memorable team led by Roger Milla became the first African country to reach a World Cup quarter-final.

More recently, they have earned more headlines for administrative chaos than the entertaining football which captured the world's imagination in Italy.

Although Cameroon have reached the last two World Cups, they failed to win a game at either, picked up red cards galore and were plagued by internal bickering.

"Cameroon football has been relaunched," said captain Rigobert Song, who fired the winning penalty in Sunday's shootout after a Nigerian effort

was ruled out although TV replays suggested it had crossed the line.

"We have shown that we are a team of exceptional quality, and we have given Cameroon football its confidence back," he added.

"Today's generation has made history because we are really a solid team."

His optimism appears justified. Song and Raymond Kalla, previously prone to red cards, emerged as the tournament's best defensive partnership.

Teenage striker Samuel Eto'o, a reserve at Real Madrid, made his mark in style with four goals, the same tally as his fellow striker Patrick Mboma.

Laurent Mayer, who was raised in Spain, had an outstanding tournament playing wide on the right while Real Madrid's Geremi Potos Njap and West Ham's tough-tackling Marc-Vivien Foe won numerous midfield battles.

Song, captain at 23, illustrates the way the team is maturing. After becoming the first player in history to be sent off in two World Cups in 1994 and 1998, he has managed to tame his urge for wild tackles.

He is now the kingpin of a

team which under Frenchman Pierre Lechantre 'has managed to combine physical strength, deft ball control and tactical discipline."

Lechantre, assistant to compatriot Claude Le Roy at the last World Cup before being handed the reins, is as confident as his captain.

He said: "Cameroon have found a great ter in that I am sure will go far from here. I think we have a fantastic group, they are a balanced team and they always respond to my appeals."

Lechantre also remained aware of the pitfalls that can face Cameroon, whose football federation is still under FIFA intervention after years of scandals and allegations of corruption.

"Our objective must be to avoid euphoria and continue working," Lechantre said.

Cameroon begin their World Cup qualifying campaign in April with a one-off match at home to Somalia. The away leg in Mogadishu was scrapped for safety reasons.

After that, they will contest a group of four from which only the winners will qualify for the 2002 World Cup.

Gazza may return early

LONDON, Feb 15: Paul Gascoigne's lawyer Mel Stein said the Middlesbrough midfielder, who injured his forearm broke during Monday night's match against Aston Villa, will be back in action before the end of the

season, reports AFP. Stein, who has acted on the wayward star's career for many years, told Radio 5 Live: "I'm no doctor but he shouldn't take more than four to six weeks to come back."

Gascoigne was stretched off in tears following a challenge with Villa's Dutch mid-

fielder George Boateng in their Premiership clash.

Stein said he spoke to Gascoigne on his way to hospital following the injury and said: "He was not a happy bunny and was too upset to talk about it."

Stein admitted Gascoigne's challenge was "clearly reckless."

But he said he could not understand the lack of sympathy for the former England international, who also broke down in tears in the Italy 1990 World Cup semi-final against West Germany following a yellow card which would have ruled him out of the final had England reached it.

Talking about Boateng, Stein said: "The guy must have an incredibly hard chin, it must be made of marble. Paul has brittle bones as we know from his history, but Paul did not intend to hurt anybody so why are they (media) so vicious about it?"

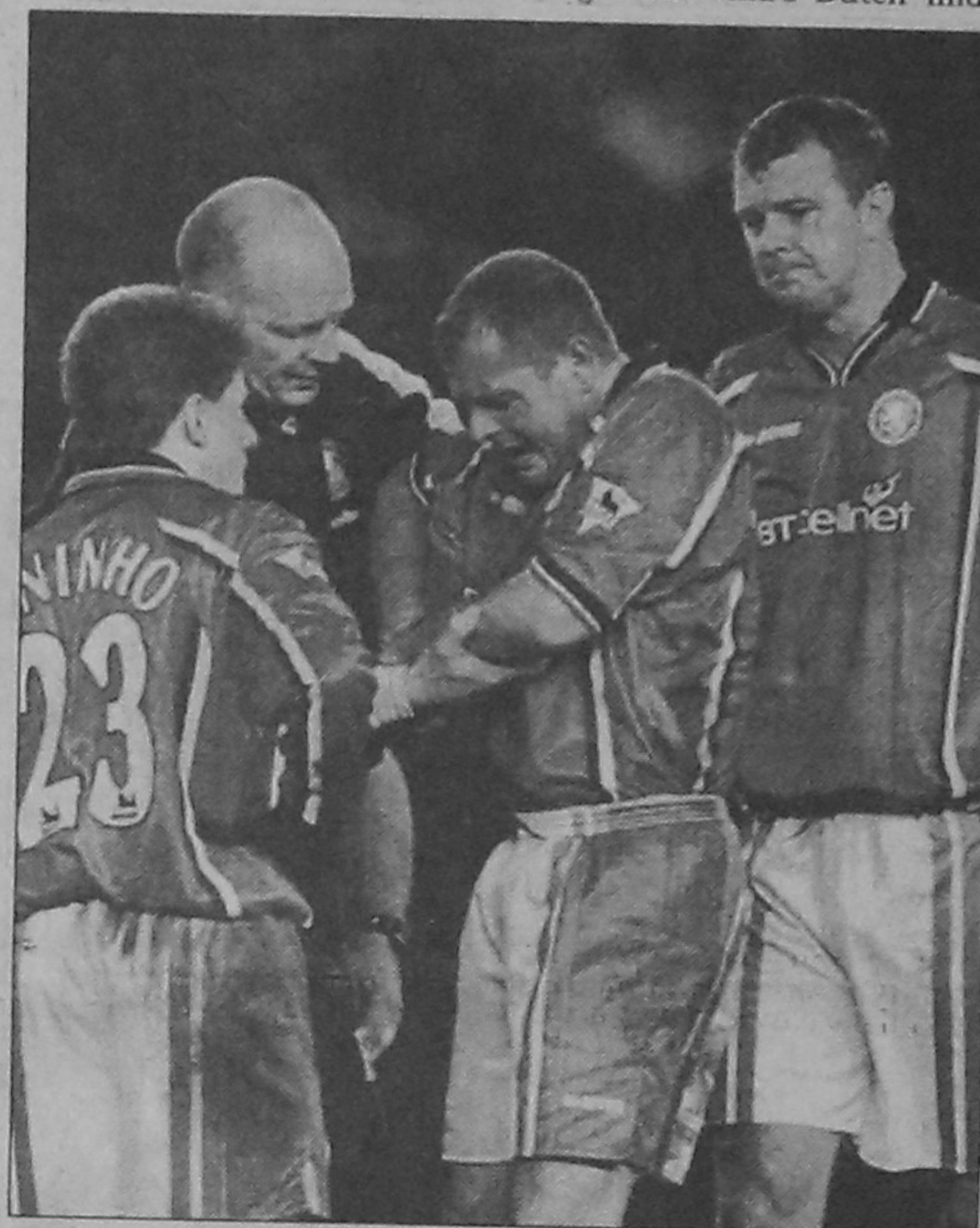
Stein also criticised Villa manager John Gregory who felt that Gascoigne should have been sent off for the foul on Boateng.

Gregory said: "I thought it was a shocking challenge by Paul Gascoigne. Although Paul left the pitch with the injury, from what I saw he maybe should have been red carded."

Stein said: Paul Gascoigne is in hospital having his arm pinned up and if John Gregory is reported correctly it's disgraceful... it's absolutely outrageous."

Despite his latest injury setback Stein expects Gascoigne to make a full recovery.

"He's 32, he's got a broken arm. If it had been a leg injury I would have been a little more disappointed about it. He's always had good healing powers," Stein said.



OUCH! Paul Gascoigne (C) of Middlesbrough is in pain after breaking his forearm during their Premiership match against Aston Villa on February 14. — AFP photo

Italian Cup semis 2nd leg

Only a miracle can stop Inter, Lazio

MILAN, Feb 15: There may be doubts over their league title chances, but Lazio and Inter Milan are racing to reach the Italian Cup final this week, reports AFP.

Lazio will start Wednesday's semi-final, second leg tie with a 5-0 lead over Venezia. Inter are 3-1 up with home advantage for Thursday's game with another tie of relegation candidates, Cagliari.

And with both matches seen as a foregone conclusion, the spotlight is likely to fall on the reserves.

Lazio's Sven Goran Eriksson should rest Chilean striker Marcelo Salas and Croatian Alen Boksic, preferring Fabrizio Ravanelli and Simone Inzaghi.

Ravanelli, who is cup-tied in the Champions League after joining from Marseille, needs to be on his best behaviour as another booking would cost him a place in the first leg of the final.

Eriksson, whose men are second in the league, will probably rest two of his Argentinians in midfield, Matias Almeyda and Juan Sebastian Veron, but keep a third - Dago Simeone - and Czech Pavel Nedved.

Eriksson has made no secret of feelings about a tournament they won just two years ago.

"To be honest, the Cup comes third in our list of priorities this season," he said last week. "But the idea of Lazio reaching another final is something wonderful. And I don't want to miss this opportunity."

Venezia coach Francesco Oddo seems determined that he won't miss it, by dropping most of his first team.

Venezia face league leaders Juventus on Sunday and Oddo doesn't want to risk injuries in a match where only honour is at stake.

Inter's tie should be more entertaining as coach Marcello Lippi is pairing Christian Vieri with Roberto Baggio up front.

With Dutch playmaker Clarence Seedorf getting the night off, Lippi will revert to a more traditional 4-4-2 formation, albeit with two mobile wingers in the left and Francesco Moriero on the right.

French workaholic Benoit Caulet and Yugoslav Vladimir Jugovic will hold the middle, while World Cup winner Laurent Blanc and goalkeeper Angelo Peruzzi will be rested.

Lippi was disappointed after Sunday's game with Torino ended 1-1, but said: "It was our first home draw for four months, and it's hardly a tragedy."

What's more, our objective in February was to reach the Italian Cup final and we've practically done that."

Cagliari will have a better team though than in the first leg, with Uruguayan playmaker Fabian O'Neill back from suspension and Cameroon striker Patrick Mboma returning as an Africa Nations Cup winner.

Italian Cup semi-final, 2nd leg

Wednesday (1700 GMT): Venezia v Lazio

Thursday (1945 GMT): Inter Milan v Cagliari

What's more, our objective in February was to reach the Italian Cup final and we've practically done that."

Cagliari will have a better team though than in the first leg, with Uruguayan playmaker Fabian O'Neill back from suspension and Cameroon striker Patrick Mboma returning as an Africa Nations Cup winner.

Italian Cup semi-final, 2nd leg

Wednesday (1700 GMT): Venezia v Lazio

Thursday (1945 GMT): Inter Milan v Cagliari

CSKA Moscow coach's wife missing

MOSCOW, Feb 15: CSKA Moscow coach Oleg Dolmatov's wife Natalia disappeared after leaving home on February 6, the Russian daily Soviet Sport reported Tuesday, reports AFP.

CSKA president Shakhmurov said Dolmatov was in Italy conducting pre-season training with his squad at the time.

He also said Moscow police were intensively searching for Dolmatova but were refusing to comment on the case.

Nigeria point at refereeing

Lagos, Feb 15: Nigeria have claimed that refereeing cost them the chance of victory over Cameroon in Sunday's African Nations' Cup final, state television reported yesterday, reports Reuters.

Tunisian referee Mourad Daami was accused of denying the co-hosts a penalty for handball early in the final, then failing to award Victor Ikpeba's spot kick in the penalty shoot-out, won 4-3 by Cameroon.

The NFA (Nigerian FA) appealed to CAF (Confederation of African Football) to address the issue in the interest of African football," the report said.