

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 we have 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 This-

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 and Regi Blinder.

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 Kharine 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."

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."

"Take 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."

"An the first way of doing that is through professionalism," he said. "In other words, we need professional referees."



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 booted whenever one of Parma's black players touched the ball in Sunday night's 0-0 draw.

Frenchmen Lilian Thuram and Youssouf Dabo, along with Ivory Coast-born Saloum Lassissi 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 "Irrudicibili" ("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 former Yugoslavia at the time of his death.

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 kick 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 (boo) 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 boozing 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."

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.

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 by players from Nigerian games against Republic of Congo and Senegal.

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 are clinging 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 Marcelo 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 runaways.

It's bit like when you miss the end of a film," Matthaeus said of Wednesday's match. Matthaeus helped Bayern win the German Cup in 1986 and 1988.

But there were also low moments. He missed a penalty in last year's final as Bayern lost to Werder Bremen in a shoot-out.

Matthaeus, who has a world-record equalling 143 international caps, played form Bayern from 1984 to 1988 and re-joined the club in 1992.

His last appearance will come in a Champions League game at home to Real Madrid on Tuesday.

Wednesday's fixtures:

Monaco-Bordeaux, Auxerre-V. Strasbourg, Lens v Bastia, St Etienne v Montpellier, Nancy v Metz, Sedan v Rennes and Le Havre v Troyes.

SIR ALEX FERGUSON

which skipper Roy Keane was sent off, leapt to the defence of the Treble winners and turned the tables on Shearer.

United players' behaviour came under the microscope when the match was shown on Match of the Day.

In one flashpoint Dutch international Jaap Stam was seen furiously berating a linesman, standing only inches from the official and bellowing in his face.

But Ferguson told the Daily Star: "Critics have been calling for the FA to look at Stam again, but I would have thought the FA might investigate why Alan Shearer went on TV and in the Press, talking about how Newcastle kicked us and how we didn't like it."

Yet my players never complained about being kicked. We never do."

The war of words with Shearer, who retorted with a brief response insisting "there's no need for me to get all sulky about things," is the latest in a long running saga involving the United boss and the Geordie goal-scoring machine.

The tension between the duo dates back to attempts by the Old Trafford chief to sign him when he left Southampton to join Blackburn Rovers in 1992 in a then record 3.3-million-pound (5.3-million-dollar) deal.

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that is through professionalism," he said. "In other words, we need professional referees."

CHINESE CHAMPS IN YUGOSLAVIA

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

Premiership

Villa bury Boro

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

Gascoigne, whose career has been plagued by injuries, was hurt shortly before haltime 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.

Gascoigne, lead by 2-0, 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, Fotos Nijatip and West Ham's tough-tackling Marc-Vivien Foé 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 turn his urge for wild tackles.

He is now the kingpin of a

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 that enveloped 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 re-launched," said captain Rigobert Song, who fired the winning penalty in Sunday's shoot-out after a Nigerian effort

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

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