

Thuram, Fergie's choice

LONDON, May 9: Manchester United are prepared to put aside 11 million pounds (16.8m dollars) to prise French international Lilian Thuram from Italian Serie A outfit Parma. The independent newspaper suggested Tuesday, reports AFP.

The paper reported that United boss Sir Alex Ferguson is a great admirer of the bespectacled 28-year-old from Guadeloupe and is keen to make him an offer after losing any hope of signing Tottenham's Sol Campbell.

Thuram, the subject of a failed bid from Serie A rivals Inter Milan last year, renewed his contract with Parma on March 22 - taking the popular Frenchman through to 2005.

"A lot of clubs have been after me, trying to convince me that it's impossible to win the league title here at Parma," he said at the time.

"But I, on the other hand, am convinced it is possible. And when it happens, I want to be here."

Thuram, who joined Parma from French club Monaco in 1996, is frequently top of the defender's rankings in the Italian press.

His international career includes the two memorable goals which earned France a 2-1 victory over Croatia in their 1998 World Cup semi-final.



Leeds United's Michael Bridges (R) volleys during a Premiership match against Everton on May 8. — AFP photo

Premiership

Leeds United's costly slip



LONDON, May 9: Leeds United dropped two potentially vital points Monday as they could only

draw 1-1 at Elland Road against Everton as three men were sent off in a bruising encounter, reports AFP.

Michael Bridges scored his 21st goal of the season to steer Leeds a little closer to their season-long ambition of Champions League football next season as the draw moved them into third place a point ahead of Liverpool.

The two sides had served up an eight-goal thriller at Goodison Park earlier in the season but here there were fewer frills in a passionate encounter.

Several full-blooded challenges were made during the opening 45 minutes in which both defences were on top as chances were few and far between.

Referee Andy D'Urso was finally forced to issue yellow cards to both Everton's Michael Ball and Leeds' Michael Duberry - the cautions arriving within 60 seconds of one another.

When Duberry then fouled

Don Hutchison five yards outside the United area, D'Urso had no choice but to issue his second caution of the game, with the resultant free kick coming to nothing.

The full-house crowd had to wait until the 21st minute for the opening goalmouth opportunity.

Jason Wilcox, restored to the Leeds side after missing the 3-1 win over Watford last Wednesday, provided a piercing left-wing cross which Harry Kewell headed over.

Lee Bowyer produced a brilliant through ball from deep inside his own half as Leeds broke the deadlock on the half hour.

The Everton players failed to pick up the run of Bridges, who raced onto the pass, chested the ball down and fired a first-time shot beyond the reach of keeper Paul Gerrard.

Within 30 seconds of the restart Leeds could have doubled the advantage as Wilcox provided an outswinging corner which Kewell volleyed straight at Gerrard.

Everton's task of salvaging a point became doubly difficult

when they were reduced to 10 men in the 50th minute.

D'Urso had no choice but to show Richard Dunne the red card for a cynical challenge on Bridges from behind, scything down the England Under-21 international with a two-footed tackle.

But after Wilcox had just failed to get the decisive touch on a Bridges cross driven across the face of goal moments later, the game then became 10-a-side as Duberry was also given his marching orders for a mistimed challenge on Pembridge in the 54th minute.

Duberry's dismissal left Leeds short at the back, which led to Wilcox being replaced by Alfie Haaland in the immediate aftermath.

Leeds keeper Nigel Martyn handed Everton the equaliser on a plate on the hour when he misjudged Hutchison's raking ball and in the ensuing scramble Nicky Barry tucked in his 10th of the season from an acute angle.

Don Hutchison then became the third player to take an early bath as Everton ended the game with just nine men after an explosive second period.

Rangers buying Australian club

SYDNEY, May 9: Glasgow Rangers officials arrived here Tuesday to finalise the purchase of Australian National Soccer League club Northern Spirit, reports AFP.

Spirit chief Remo Nogarotto said he expected them to stay until Friday and by then he anticipated the deal would be sealed.

Rangers, the Scottish champions, are believed to be offering 2.68 million dollars (1.5 million US) for a 51 per cent stake in the Sydney club.

Nogarotto said he "could not be happier" with the way negotiations have been conducted and all was going according to plan.

However the new owners will be asked for 250,000 dollars to pay for a transfer of ownership of the licence.

Former Blackburn Rovers and West Ham United midfielder Robbie Slater plays for Spirit, who are coached by former Australian international striker Graham Arnold.

Spirit have had a poor season finishing 13th in the 16-team league and troubled by dwindling crowds in their second season in the NSL.

Cubans' baseball tour of US to continue

SAINT PAUL, Minnesota, May 9: A group of Cuban baseball players continued their schedule here Monday despite the possible defection of one of their peers over the weekend, reports AFP.

Mario Miguel Chauvi arrived at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport on Saturday afternoon with the baseball team from the University of Havana and the Polytechnic Institute of Jose Antonio Echeverria.

The team is due to play a team from the University of Saint Thomas at the Metrodome Stadium in Minneapolis on Tuesday.

After a brief welcoming ceremony Chauvi walked through the terminal, got into a waiting car and drove away.

At a news conference late Sunday Saint Thomas president Dennis Dease said the school does not know the player's whereabouts. The university hopes "that the young man will check in with us or the immigration service so that we know he's okay."

In interviews with local media, Chauvi's teammates lamented his disappearance, calling him a "traitor" if he does indeed defect and saying they had no idea he was contemplating such a move.

Speaking on a local radio station, an official with the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) would not confirm or deny that Chauvi has contacted them or asked for political asylum.

All 50 members of the visiting Cuban group, which includes players, coaches and University of Havana staff, have individual visas allowing them to stay in the United States for 30 days.

Nothing new

From page 13 makes it harder for the WICB to stomach these kinds of interruptions.

With large sums of money being spent to develop grounds in places like in Grenada and St. Vincent, where some may argue the weather is less erratic, the WICB could very well find themselves being bombarded by authorities in those two islands to transfer the Guyana Test to them.

Therefore, Bourda Oval, for all its rich history, and Guyana could find itself being restricted to no Tests and just a limited-overs international or two.

They are far less prestigious, but fastly growing to be even more stimulating for spectators than the longer version of the game.

Euro 2000 tickets go public

ROTTERDAM, May 9: Euro 2000 tickets for the general public left the Netherlands and Belgium amid tight security yesterday and championship organisers said they should reach fans by Thursday, reports Reuters.

In an almost military-style operation, the tickets have been produced on security paper at top secret locations in Belgium and the Netherlands, the two countries staging the championship finals in June and July.

Even before the tickets reached the streets the organisers went to great lengths to ensure no one tampered with them.

The tickets were on rolls to minimise the risk of an opportunistic employee grabbing one. Once they were divided up, machines were used to stuff them into envelopes.

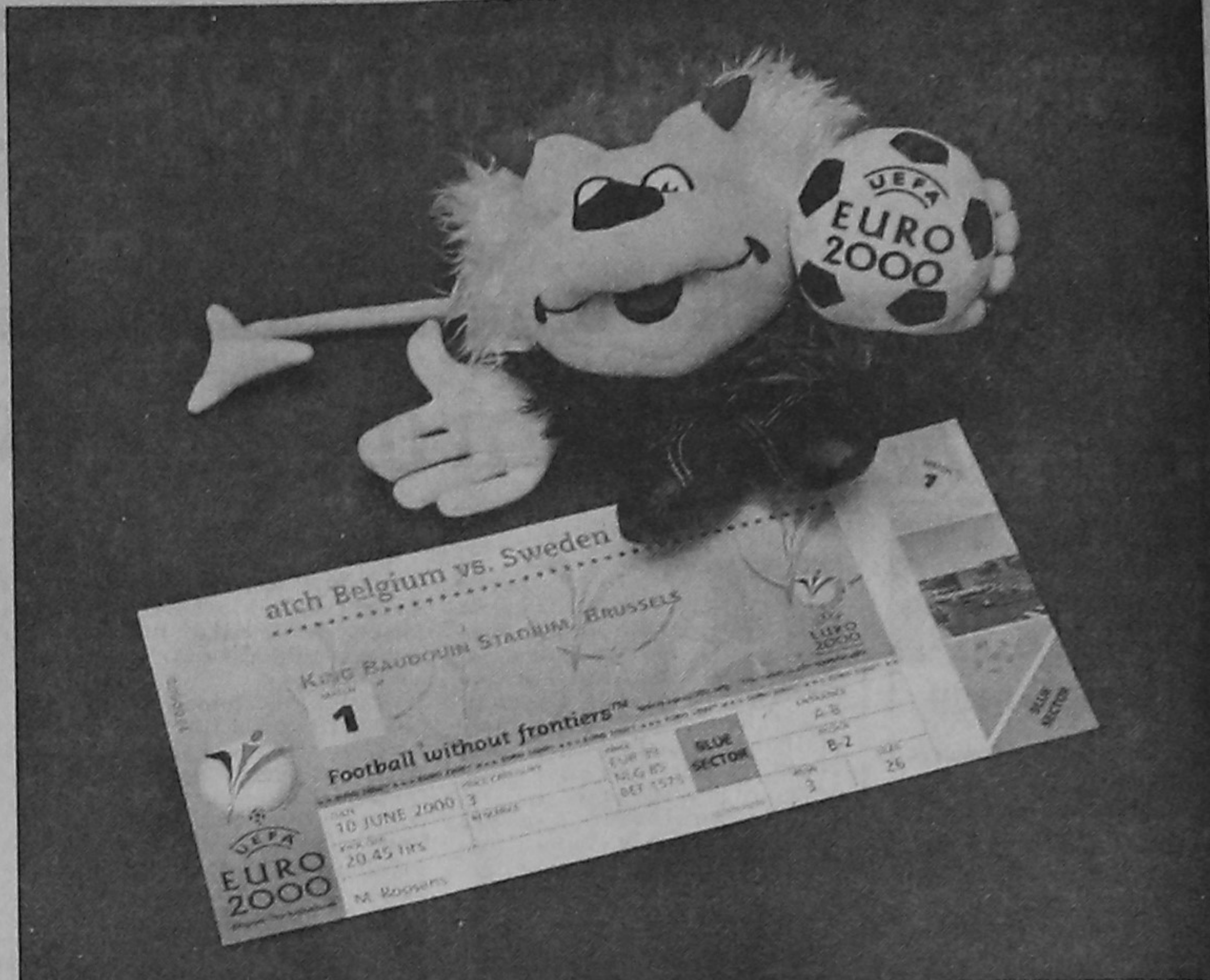
Stored in high-security warehouses until their departure in armoured vehicles on Monday, the 400,000 tickets earmarked for the general public will be delivered personally to fans by courier and must be signed for.

Costing around two guilders (dollars 0.813) each to produce, with a photograph of the stadium where the match is being played, a barcode and the name of the ticket-holder, organisers say Euro 2000 tickets are fraud-proof.

"We've learned from previous tournaments and we've had discussions with the Dutch and Belgian governments and anti-fraud organisations," Euro 2000 director Harry Been told a news conference to unveil the tickets in the Netherlands.

The first championships ticket was presented earlier to Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt at a ceremony in Belgium, while in the Netherlands, veteran Dutch coach Rinus Michels presented a fan from Rotterdam with a ticket for the Dutch match against the Czech Republic.

More than 96 per cent of the tickets have been sold but some remain for first round matches. Euro 2000 organisers will announce before the end of this month how they will go about selling the remainder.



A specimen of the official Euro 2000 ticket for opening game between Belgium-Sweden which are going on sale soon. — AFP photo

Barca bank on Figo, Nou Camp



BARCELONA, May 9(Reuters/Internet): Barcelona are pinning their hopes on the return of Luis Figo and the restorative powers of a packed Nou Camp crowd when they attempt another epic Champions League comeback against Valencia on Wednesday.

Louis van Gaal's side, who were roared all the way to a 6-4 aggregate win over Chelsea in the last round after losing the first game 3-1, will need another helping hand from their fans after a 4-1 capitulation in Valencia in the semifinal first leg.

But of more tangible importance to their chances on Wednesday could be the fitness of Figo. He was sorely missed against Valencia and in Saturday's 2-0 home league defeat by Rayo Vallecano.

Figo, suspended for the first semifinal game, was ruled out against Rayo because of a muscle tear when Barca were so bereft of attacking ideas they were whistled from the pitch at the end.

He returned to training on Monday and a subsequent scan revealed the injury had almost healed, Barcelona doctors said. Van Gaal is remaining tight-lipped over his team selection but is almost certain to take a gamble on the influential Portuguese forward, whose importance to the side was summed up on Tuesday by Catalan defender Sergi Barjuan.

"Figo is the best right-sided forward in the world at the moment. He's proved that," said Sergi.

"We always need him and

more in a game like this where we're in an extreme situation." Extreme is about right after a first leg that saw them overrun by the vibrant, attacking play of a Valencia side

currently in sparkling form. To score the three goals they need on Wednesday Barca are going to have to throw everything at Valencia from the start.

The problem is that such an approach runs the risk not just of defeat but of total humiliation against arguably the best counter-attacking side in Europe at the moment.

Valencia have scored 17 goals in five league victories over the past month, plus another nine in European Cup matches against Barca and Lazio.

Their midfield quartet of Gaizka Mendietta, Francisco Farinos, Gerard Lopez and Kily Gonzalez have been in irresistible form, while Miguel Angel Angulo and Claudio Lopez form a high quality forward partnership.

That is clearly a worry for Barcelona whose striker Patrick Kluivert admitted: "We know they're in great form at the moment and it is a concern that they might score the first goal."

To counter that attacking strength van Gaal may opt to revert to a 4-3-3 formation, with Rivaldo moving back out left.

Valencia coach Hector Cuper will also have something to think about in terms of tactics after seeing his side beaten 3-0 at the Nou Camp in a league match in April.

Cuper changed from his usual 4-4-2 formation for that game, playing instead with five at the back -- just as he had in a 3-0 Champions League defeat at Old Trafford earlier in the campaign.

Those defeats were the result of Valencia trying to alter their game plan against supposedly superior opposition.

Last week's 4-1 victory over the favourites should persuade Cuper that his side are inferior to no other team.

Cuper's biggest problem has been to keep euphoria in check after last week's victory which sets them up to make it three wins out of three in meetings between the two sides in European competition.

There is also the small matter of a place in the Champions League final in Paris on May 24 -- a prize that is now so close the players feel they can almost reach out and touch it.

"We have an historic opportunity and we must take full advantage," midfielder Gerard said.

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Referee: Vitor Manuel Melo Pereira (Portugal)

Premiership wages booming



LONDON, May 9: English Premiership wages are set to break through the 500 million pound (765m dollar) barrier this year - and the growth shows no signs of stopping, reports AFP.

Accountants Deloitte and Touche released their latest report into the financial state of the Premiership on Monday and revealed an overall salary increase of 31 per cent to 397m for the 1998-99 season.

The report claims the spiralling cost of running a successful club may force some clubs to merge if they are to compete at the highest level.

In the year they were crowned Treble-winners Manchester United topped the chart, splashing out almost 37m on their own wage bill.

With the likes of captain Roy Keane having signed hugely improved contracts since the report was compiled, it is almost certain English football's top flight will have spent more than half a billion pounds on wages alone this year.

Liverpool, Chelsea and Newcastle are the next biggest payers, with Wimbledon and Charlton - in a year which brought them relegation - the worst.

The newly-promoted south London side spent 8.25m on wages in 1998-99, which in itself was an 82 per cent increase on their previous season in the First Division.

The figures clearly show it is not just on the pitch where Manchester United have a huge advantage over their main rivals.

Walker has bankrolled the Woodville Park club is evident in a wage bill which more than exceeds turnover.

The report makes grim reading for the rump of the Premiership, who can almost give up any hope of challenging for the championship.

It leads to the suggestion that the only way to survive and prosper in the new era of football could be to merge.

"The Premier League table of the future may feature large single team cities or regions," explains the report, edited by Gerry Boon.

"Perhaps this might even prompt a few Football League mergers."

"The geography of the Premier League may provide the clues to which teams will survive in the long term but fortunately it is only part of the story."

"I have to add something in the summer - bring in two or three top-class players - but that is not easy. My main target is not to lose anybody."

The Frenchman insisted the likes of Emmanuel Petit and

"I am always surprised to read that some players are leaving when they know the reality of the situation."

"If I believe what I hear I am scared - I will have to play myself next season! At the end of the season Emmanuel has three years to go, that's the reality."

"I also look at them on the pitch and they are committed to the club. It's agent talk. They create rumours and think that rumours can turn into fact."

Wenger dreams of toppling MU



LONDON, May 9: Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger has insisted the Gunners can stake a serious claim to

Manchester United's Premiership dominance next season, reports AFP.

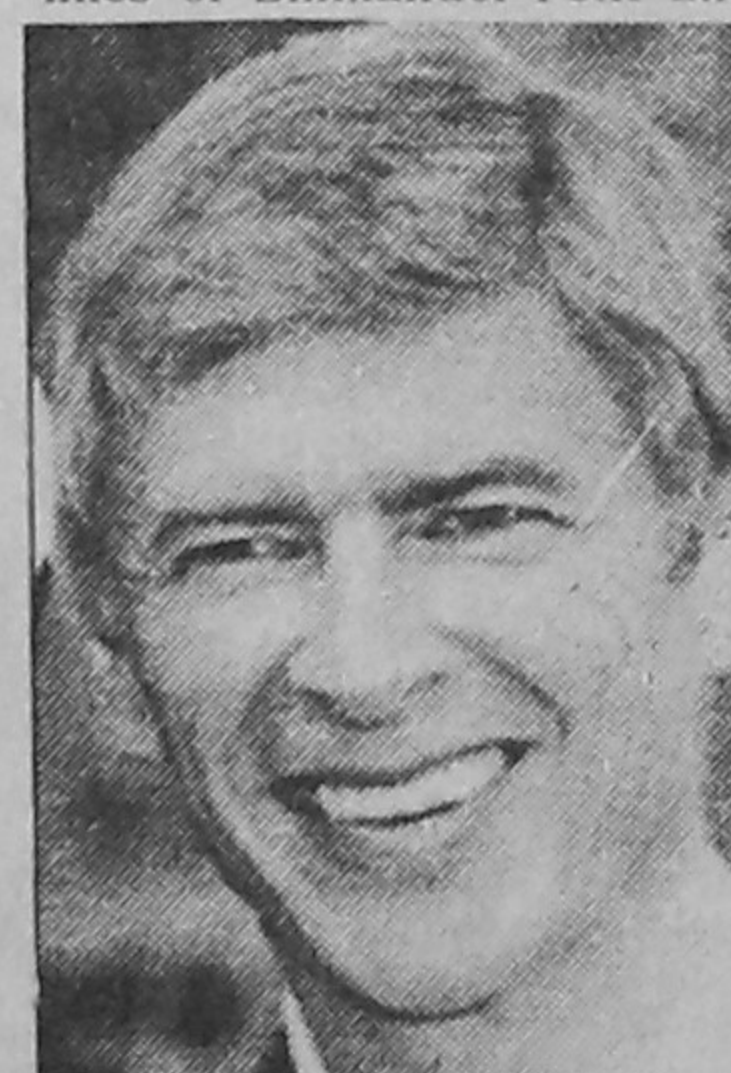
Arsenal's late run of eight straight league wins have taken them to second in the table and they can look forward to a Champions League campaign - but they have been powerless to prevent United claim a sixth championship title in eight years by a vast margin.

Wenger was forced to concede that Sir Alex Ferguson's side looked "untouchable" in domestic football this season but remains convinced the Gunners can mount a serious challenge next time out.

"Who can stop them? We can stop them and maybe Chelsea, Liverpool and Leeds. Don't forget that Leeds were at the top for a while," said Wenger.

"We dropped points early in the season because we went into it without a real target striker as Thierry Henry was not playing and we lost (Nicolas) Anelka.

"But I believe there is now something there and this club has the potential to fight with the best teams. We have shown that in the UEFA Cup.



ARSENE WENGER

Marc Overmars - rumoured to be on their way - are going nowhere.

"Marc and Emmanuel are two world-class players. We want to fight at the top level and to do that you have to keep your world-class players.

But United remain the flag-ship Premiership outfit by a huge margin.

At 1.813 their huge support also spends more per head than any other crowd in the top flight, and as a consequence their massive wage bill accounts for only 33 per cent of their total income when the average figure is 59 per cent.

This contrasts sharply with Blackburn Rovers, who despite finishing fifth in the wages table suffered relegation.

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2006 World Cup England step up a gear

LONDON, May 9: England stepped up their 2006 World Cup campaign Monday as their bid team completed preparations for a crucial visit to the Bahamas this week by issuing a blueprint for success, reports AFP.

Sir Bobby Charlton and Sir Geoff Hurst will head the deputisation which is chasing the three CONCACAF votes that could tip the balance in England's favour.

South Africa remain favourites to land the tournament for Africa for the first time and their bid, plus that of fellow African nation Morocco, was backed by FIFA president Sepp Blatter last weekend.

But the England campaigners feel the week will make the difference.

With the Wembley development, the jewel in the 2006 crown, now almost certainly guaranteed, the bid team feel they can ensure the best World Cup in history.

"The World Cup is the most prestigious commodity in world football," said campaign director Alec McGivan.

"The country that is given the honour of staging it must earn the right."

"Our guarantees are concrete. They are based on what we know we can offer the FIFA family of football."

"They are the bedrock for what we believe will be the most exciting World Cup ever," McGivan added.

The bid team pointed to a raft of factors they say can hand England the jamboree for the first time since their winning year of 1966, including 15 world class venues, the new Wembley stadium, capacity crowds generating a passionate atmosphere and top level security.

On Monday he slammed club management in an interview with the Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper.

Frankfurt a sinking ship



FRANKFURT, Germany, May 9: Despite a recent rich vein of form in the German Bundesliga Eintracht Frankfurt continue to stare financial ruin and an uncertain future in the face, reports AFP.

The German Football Federation (DFB) on Monday dismissed a Frankfurt appeal against a 500,000 Mark fine and deduction of two points for gross economic negligence.

That would push Frankfurt down to 14th in the table, just four points above the relegation zone with two games remaining. The appeal will now be heard by the DFB's licensing complaints committee but has little hope of success.

Frankfurt have also lost treasurer Rainer Lehen, who threw in the towel Saturday after just six months in the difficult job.

On Monday he slammed club management in an interview with the Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper.

"I did not want to be made responsible for incompetent decisions which would drive the club into financial ruin," Lehen stormed after his blueprint to reform the crisis ridden club was rejected by executive members who Lehen accuses of being only interested in hanging on to power.

The plans I presented were absolutely clear and optimal for Eintracht," Lehen said. "Even a blind man can see where things are headed. There was no real discussion, though, within the executive committee."

Leben says Frankfurt's notoriously sloppy accounting practices and dubious business style have left it unmanageable unless radical reform is implemented immediately.

"The economic management of the club can not be continued using the current structures," Lehen said.

Even if Frankfurt manage to stay in the Bundesliga they may be forced into the Second Division anyway by the DFB, which has made the renewal of Ein-

tracht's playing licence next season conditional on an extra 20 million Marks (9 million dollars) flowing into the club's accounts before the end of May.

There are reportedly four different companies looking at a sponsorship deal but so far nothing has been announced.

A further vital part of the whole reform process is turning the club into joint-stock company. Officially that would transform it from a football club into a registered business with the new 20 million Mark sponsor getting at most a 25 per cent share of stock.

This in turn brings further complications because once the "club" Eintracht Frankfurt is replaced by the "company" Eintracht Frankfurt all the player's contracts will need to be renegotiated.

If the players rebel or any other part of the highly complicated process goes wrong or is not completed by the May 28th deadline Frankfurt could face one of two possible scenarios: being forcibly relegated and left on the verge of financial collapse in the Second Division, or staying in the Bundesliga and not having a team if the players refuse a new deal.

Ex-treasurer Lehen had hoped to be around to help solve the problem but he now plans to cut all ties with Eintracht Frankfurt out of deep frustration.

"I have a totally clear conscience when I say that without me Eintracht would already be dead and buried," Lehen said.

Juve eying Woodgate

ROME, May 9: Juventus are stepping up interest in Leeds United defender Jonathan Woodgate