

Hagi appalled

BUCHAREST, May 12: Less than a week after pledging to return to fight corruption in the national soccer league, Romanian star Gheorghe Hagi acknowledged having second thoughts about the effectiveness of such an endeavour in comments published Friday, reports AFP.

"I no longer have any confidence in anything or anyone," said Hagi in an interview with the daily Pro Sport. "The (soccer) federation has no power and doesn't take any measures."

Hagi claimed important matches were decided for up to 60,000 dollars, a figure also cited by other Romanian soccer figures. He said that Romania's future performance as a national team was undermined by corruption and "match rigging". Romania is due to play in the Euro 2000 soccer championships and are seen as one of the best countries in southeast Europe. Many of their players have contracts with foreign clubs. Hagi plays for Istanbul's Galatasaray.

Hagi's latest attack on the way soccer is conducted came after Farul Constanta, the team from his home town on the Black Sea, was relegated. There are suspicions that the relegation may have been the result of match rigging.

Hagi, 35, said he was particularly upset with the chairmen of two clubs who he claimed had too much authority — Jean Padureanu of Gloria Bistrita, and George Stefan of Ceahlaul Pietra Neamt.

"They meet in a restaurant and write on pieces of paper; that one will get the title, that one will be relegated," he was quoted as saying.

Contacted for reaction, Stefan would only say: "It's his opinion and he has a right to it."

Last week, Hagi said he would return this summer to Romania to fight soccer corruption.

Hagi debuted for Romania at age 17. After the 1989 fall of communism, he signed on with Spain's Real Madrid, then moved on to Italy's Brescia and then to Barcelona, another Spanish club. He is very popular in Istanbul, where he now lives.

Lyon coach set to leave

LYON, France, May 12: Bernard Lacombe, coach of French First Division side Lyon announced Friday that he will quit the club at the end of the season because of pressure.

The 47-year-old former international midfielder blamed the difficult season for his decision to retire after four years as coach of the side, currently third in the French league.

"I quit. The match in Montpellier will be my last as coach with Lyon," Lacombe told, the Lyon figure.

"I made the decision two months ago after our elimination in the (French) League Cup against Bastia. We were playing against our opponents and our own supporters. It was too much," Lacombe said.

A native of the south eastern France region, Lacombe began his career as a player with Lyon (1969-1978), before joining Saint-Etienne (1978-1979), followed by Bordeaux (1979-1986). He returned to Lyon, then in the Second Division in 1988 as sporting director and was appointed coach in 1996.

Lacombe's last match will be Lyon's game against Montpellier on Saturday, the final this season.

His successor has not yet been named, however, tipped as a strong contender is Luis Fernandez, coach of Spanish Primera Liga side Athletic Bilbao.

Best fails to attend premiere of own movie

LONDON, May 12: Ailing British football legend George Best, recently out of hospital after treatment for alcohol abuse, failed Thursday to turn up to the premiere of a new film about his career, reports AFP.

The former Manchester United star stayed away for "health reasons", reports AFP. Best needed emergency treatment after collapsing in London two months ago following decades of heavy drinking. He has since left hospital, and has been told to give up alcohol to stay alive.

All rumour

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England have not won a series either at home or away to West Indies in more than 30 years and a brittle West Indies batting line-up, weakened by the absence of Lara, would have afforded them a great chance to make amends.

In 17 Tests, Lara has scored 1,980 runs against England at an average of 79.20 including a world record 375 in St. John's, Antigua, six years ago.

On the last tour to England five years ago, he hit centuries in each of the last three Tests of the six-match series and finished with 765 runs at an average of 85.00.

Once again, he will be called upon to shoulder the batting and help to restore the West Indies' reputation in the game.

SQUAD

Jimmy Adams (captain), Sherwin Campbell, Curtly Ambrose, Shivnarine Chanderpaul, Corey Collymore, Chris Gayle, Adrian Griffith, Wavell Hinds, Ridley Jacobs, Reon King, Brian Lara, Nixon McLean, Mahendra Nagamootoo, Franklin Rose, Ramnareesh Sarwan, Courtney Walsh.

Serie A preview

Juve look to wrap it up



ROME, May 12: Juventus should seal their 26th Serie A title on Sunday when a

win over midtable Perugia will suffice no matter what closest rivals Lazio manage at Reggina - Juventus lead Lazio by two points with one match to play. However, in most non-Juventus fans eyes it will be a title overshadowed by the controversial refereeing decision last Sunday that saw a last minute Parma equaliser against the Turin club ruled out and almost virtually handed the crown to them at the expense of their Roman rivals, reports AFP.

The normal Italian hysteria followed with death threats against the referee Massimo De Santis' mother and cries of foul play which usually comes from the southern Italian sides who consider that their northern cousins, including AC Milan and Inter, are heavily favoured by referees.

However, realistically when the dust settles Lazio will have to look at themselves and wonder how did they let a second successive title slip from their grasp - they went down by a point to AC Milan last year - and coach Sven Goran Eriksson may well pay the penalty for that.

Despite spending lavishly and bringing in virtually a whole new midfield in the shape of Argentine stars Diego Simeone and Juan Veron they once again succumbed to another period of mid-season blues allowing the much more mundane but consistent Juventus to slip through on the inside.

Juventus, for whom Dutchman Edgar Davids has been the star, should have no trouble in wrapping up the three points required at Perugia, whose form has slipped alarmingly in the last few weeks.

Perugia's owner Luciano Gaucci has tried to get his players up this week with the threat that they are playing for their careers against Juventus but with safety assured and little else to play for it is hard to imagine that they will heed his words - despite the fact he has gone through 13 coaches in nine years.

Lazio should also prevail at Reggina, who have performed miracles to stay up following their promotion last season, and hang on to the hope that somehow Juventus slip up as they did against unfashionable Verona a fortnight ago when only Davids looked as if he was interested.

Elsewhere Inter Milan and Parma look set for a Champions League play-off match as both lie on 55 points and have

relatively straightforward matches to finish with. Inter, who have denied reports that Australian-born record buy Christian Vieri will



EDGAR DAVIDS

be on his way in the summer following a miserable season of injury and who pushed club president Massimo Moratti to the limit when he posed nude for a credit card advert, must rebound from their woeful 4-0 home defeat by Fiorentina last Sunday and win at Cagliari.

Parma, who have been frustratingly inconsistent all season, host Lecce, who have also done well to stay up having gained the reputation of being something of a yo-yo club.

Should AC Milan lose at home to Udinese and Parma and Inter win then there will be a three-way battle for the two remaining Champions League places and a chance to avenge Italy's appalling performances in European competition this season.

FIXTURES:
Sunday (kick-offs 1300 GMT): Bari v Bologna, Cagliari v Inter Milan, Perugia v Juventus, Parma v Lecce, Torino v Fiorentina, Lazio v Reggina, Verona v AS Roma, AC Milan v Udinese, Fiorentina v Venezia



A Rome policeman kicks a fan during an assault on Lazio supporters who were engaged in a sit-in in front of the FIGC (Italian Football Association) headquarters. The Lazio devotees were protesting a highly controversial refereeing decision which may have cost the club the Serie A title.

— AFP photo

Primera Liga preview

Nerves, Deportivo's only worry



MADRID, May 12: Leaders Deportivo La Coruna, who play at Real

Santander on Sunday, are just two matches away from their first ever Spanish title having led for the last six months, reports AFP.

Deportivo, who let a 2-1 lead slip last weekend after Djalmirha was sent off and ended up with just a point, are three points ahead of Barcelona and will be hoping their jinx of 1994 does not strike again - though they could wrap it up on Sunday if they win and Barcelona fail to beat Real Sociedad.

A missed penalty by Yugoslavian Miroslav Djukic, who is now with Champions League finalists Valencia, in the final match of the season, after Brazilian Bebeto refused to take the spot kick, handed the title to Barcelona.

Yet again, Barcelona, who are at Real Sociedad on Sunday, are breathing down the neck of Javier Irureta's side.

Defeat at the hands of Valencia in the Champions League semi-final in midweek could give Barcelona renewed motivation for domestic action. Real Zaragoza, five points behind Deportivo in third, could mathematically still win the title.

Meanwhile Real Sociedad will be looking to dismiss any lingering doubts about First Division survival against Barca.

A victory for Galicians Deportivo this season would sig-

nal the first league title for Deportivo since its founding in 1906 at the expense of Barcelona.

Behind Deportivo and

EU ministers favour Bosman ruling

BRUSSELS, May 12: European ministers have given the thumbs down to dismantling the Bosman ruling among Europe's football leagues at an informal meeting, it was revealed here on Thursday, reports AFP.

The sports world governing body FIFA had wanted a 6 plus 5 rule where six home country players had to be on the pitch at any one time.

Christophe Forax, spokesman for Viviane Reding, the European commissioner for education and culture, said: "On Wednesday an informal meeting of European sports ministers gave no signal that professional sport could exclude the free circulation of players within the EU."

According to Forax, that means FIFA's 6 plus 5 rule would be unlikely to go through.

The Bosman ruling of December 15 1995 stated that football was acting against the Treaty of Rome and the free movement of workers within the EU by restricting clubs to just three foreign EU players on the pitch at any one time.

Barcelona, four clubs are fighting for the third and fourth Champions League spots.

Fourth-placed Valencia, on a high after reaching the May 24 Champions League final in Paris, have a tough task at Celta Vigo. Valencia coach Hector Cuper knows his side will need to try and surge ahead of Zaragoza and Alaves, who all have 60 points.

Alaves and Zaragoza have easier matches, against Numancia and Malaga who have nothing left to play for this season.

Next week comes a crunch match for those European places when Valencia host Zaragoza in their last match of the season.

With 59 points, sixth-placed Real Madrid travel to Real Betis hoping to claw their way back into Champions League contention although they, like Valencia, have the safety net of their Stade de France final to fall back on.

The only Saturday match sees the two relegated sides Atletico Madrid and Sevilla battle it out.

FIXTURES:

Saturday: Atletico Madrid v Sevilla

Sunday: Real Valladolid v Real Mallorca, Alaves v Numancia, Espanyol v Athletic Bilbao, Racing Santander v Deportivo La Coruna, Real Zaragoza v Malaga, Celta Vigo v Valencia, Real Sociedad v Barcelona, Rayo Vallecano v Real Oviedo

Keegan leaves it to luck

LONDON, May 12: England coach Kevin Keegan is adamant that his side will not prepare for the possibility of a penalty shoot-out deciding their fate at Euro 2000 this summer, reports AFP.

Despite having seen England crash out of two World Cups, in 1990 and 1998, as well as the 1996 European Championships on spot-kicks, Keegan insists that there is nothing to be gained from practising the art of sudden death decisions.

In an ITV documentary entitled 'Spot of Bother', which is due to be televised next week, Keegan says: "I can't tell you who scored penalties, but I can tell you who missed them."

That is what is so cruel about the shoot-out. But you cannot practise penalties."

England skipper Alan Shearer shares the same opinion, telling the same programme: "It's down to luck. Sometimes you are better off just spinning a coin."

But Newcastle boss Bobby Robson, who still bears the scars of England's shoot-out loss to Germany in the 1990 World Cup semi-finals, has blasted such thoughts.

He said: "You have to practise. It's about your nerve, your mentality, kicking quality, making a decision and not changing it, keeping your head down and knocking the ball in."

His views are backed by German legend Franz Beckenbauer, who masterminded that victory in Italy.

"It is best that a player becomes accustomed to taking penalties," he said.

"When he is comfortable with his technique, the rest of the process is about strength of mind. We never left anything to chance."

Worms, Sforza targets Bayern

COLOGNE, Germany, May 12: German Bundesliga outfit Borussia Dortmund on Thursday denied reports that Bayern Munich were interested in buying German international Christian Worms, reports AFP.

Kicker magazine reported Thursday that Bayern had made a 14.5 million Mark (6.7 million dollar) offer for Worms, but this was promptly dismissed by Dortmund's sport director Michael Zorc.

"They have not asked about him nor has any price been set, it's all speculation," Zorc said.

Bayern tried to sign Worms a year ago when he moved from French side Paris St. Germain back to Germany but a dispute opened up about the size of the transfer fee and he signed instead a three year contract until June 2002 with Dortmund.

Bayern are on the hunt for quality defenders to replace Markus Babel and Lothar Matthaeus and a top notch midfielder.

Kaiserslautern's Swiss international Ciriaco Sforza has been singled out as a candidate for the latter position, especially after his public bust-up with coach Otto Rehagel earlier in the season.

Sforza played the 1995/96 season for Bayern but left under a cloud when he forced his way out of his contract to chase a big offer at Inter Milan.

Bayern captain Stefan Effenberg, another difficult personality who was likewise initially unwanted at Bayern two years ago, has spoken out in favour of Sforza's return.

"When you can have a player of Sforza's class you have to forget things which happened in the past," Effenberg said.

During the season, when Bayern threw out Mario Basler for ill discipline it was speculated that Bayern might swap him for Sforza. Basler did indeed move to Kaiserslautern but Sforza stayed after patching up his brittle relationship with trainer Rehagel.

Sforza remains under contract to Kaiserslautern but has let it be known he would not be unwilling to go to Bayern.

Rangers take over Aussie club

SYDNEY, May 12: Scottish champions Glasgow Rangers have officially taken over Australian National Soccer League club Northern Spirit after both clubs confirmed the deal here Friday, reports AFP.

Rangers senior executives flew out with a 51 percent controlling interest in the Sydney NSL club, believed to have cost 2.68 million dollars (1.55 million US dollars).

Glasgow officials are expected to return to Australia in the next "seven to 10 days" to finalise details.

Spirit chief Remo Nogarotto said the deal was subject to approval of the Scottish Football Association and Soccer Australia, but he did not foresee any problems.

"The parties have agreed to terms, the contract terms are being drawn up by our lawyers and should be signed by next week," he said.

Nogarotto saw the deal as a precursor for future European links with Australian soccer.

"Glasgow Rangers are one of world soccer's super powers and they have shown leadership in breaking away and investing into the game," he said.

"A deal like this brings capital, and with that bigger opportunities for us to nurture and help our talent stay here."

This gives us a better chance of offering the level of wages that are on offer in Europe."

Bundesliga preview

Glory beckon Leverkusen



COLOGNE, Germany, May 12: Bayer Leverkusen go into this week-end's penultimate Bundesliga round

on the threshold of greatness, reports AFP.

A victory over Eintracht Frankfurt and either a loss or draw by Bayern Munich at Arminia Bielefeld Saturday would give them their first ever German league title.

Leverkusen on 70 points hold a three point lead over Bayern but no one is daring to pop the champagne just yet.

When news leaked that city mayor Paul Hebel was organising a reception the club's weighty manager Rainer Calmund almost exploded.

"I will personally shoot anyone who talks about a champions banquet," he warned.

Brazilian star Emerson expects to return after a month away with knee trouble, while the visitors are likely to rush back playmaker Horst Heldt after his torn calf muscle.

Having lost their appeal this week against the German Football Federation's decision to dock them two points at season's end for bookkeeping irregularities Frankfurt need a win to protect against relegation.

Not that Leverkusen should feel overconfident. Frankfurt may be 13th on the table but they have really turned it on of late and are currently one of the league's most in form teams.

Bayern Munich also travel to a club far beneath them on the table but Arminia Bielefeld still have a theoretical chance of staying in the top flight and will fight tenaciously to protect that.

Bayern played valiantly against Real Madrid this week but came up short in the Champions League semi-final, losing defender Jens Jeremies in the process to a broken collar bone.

The rest of the Bayern team are quite simply mentally and

physically exhausted. Leverkusen, however, are fresh after a two week break in which Bayern played the German Cup



EMERSON

final and two draining games against Real.

Fates will likewise be decided Saturday at the base of the table. Six teams can still go down - Freiburg (37 points), Frankfurt (36), Borussia Dortmund (36), Hansa Rostock (35), SSV Ulm (32) and Bielefeld (29) - but only two have to.

Dortmund have primed themselves for an emotional battle with bitter derby rivals Schalke, especially after Schalke fans held up a provocative banner a fortnight ago with the message: "Send Dortmund down to the Second Division and all is forgiven."

Coach Udo Lattek has stuck up copies of the banner in Dortmund's dressing room to motivate his men while the players have forfeited their usual bonus payment.

Dortmund captain Stefan Reuter said: "Some of the guys may not know that yet but we have to think about the club at such a difficult time. We can't cash in after driving things into

the ground. It's a question of honour. If anyone still wants the bonus they should come to me and I will explain to them personally."

Jens Lehmann will have it especially tough Saturday. The out of form keeper made his name at Schalke before doing the unthinkable and switching to Dortmund last year after a brief intermezzo at AC Milan.

"I really, really want to put a goal past Jens Lehmann," Schalke captain Olaf Thon said. "My free kicks are good at the minute. I might even get one in from 20 metres. Maybe I'll even get to take a penalty seeing as (Marc) Wilmots missed our last two."

Kaiserslautern will be without injured French star Youri Djorkaeff at Freiburg as they bid to hang on to a UEFA Cup spot. Djorkaeff's manager quashed talk Thursday that he may leave after just one season if Kaiserslautern don't qualify for Europe.

There is a potential spot in the Champions League at stake for combatants 1860 Munich and Hertha Berlin. Martin Max, who scored a hat trick against his old side Schalke in the previous round also has hopes of finishing the season as the Bundesliga's top scorer.

Hansa Rostock will fight their relegation battle against VfB Stuttgart, while Ulm will receive Wolfsburg. In remaining matches where there is little left to play for Hamburg will receive Unterhaching and Werder Bremen will host bottom side Duisburg.

FIXTURES:

Saturday (kick-off 1300GMT): SV Hamburg v Unterhaching, SSV Ulm v VfL Wolfsburg, Freiburg v Kaiserslautern, 1860 Munich v Hertha Berlin, Borussia Dortmund v Schalke 04, Hansa Rostock v VfB Stuttgart, Arminia Bielefeld v Bayern Munich, Werder Bremen v MSV Duisburg, Bayer Leverkusen v Eintracht Frankfurt

Premiership preview

Euro spots, survival order of the day



LONDON, May 12: Two more Premiership issues will be decided on Sunday with Leeds and Liverpool

pool fighting it out for the one remaining Champions League place and Bradford and Wimbledon battling to stay in the top flight, reports AFP.

The team which finishes fourth in the league will miss out on a Champions League spot next season but will qualify for the UEFA Cup.

The last remaining issue will be finalised next Saturday with the winner of the FA Cup final between struggling Chelsea and Aston Villa also earning a UEFA Cup place.

Third-placed Leeds have 68 points, one more than Liverpool in fourth, and face a tricky away trip to Upton Park to tackle West Ham.

The Hammers are formidable on home soil - only four other teams have won more home games in the Premiership, but Leeds are equally strong away from Elland Road. Leeds away record is second only to Manchester United.

Liverpool go to Valley Parade where Bradford have to win and hope that Wimbledon drop points at Southampton if they are to retain their Premiership status.

Despite playing three in attack, Liverpool have failed to find the net in their last four games - they have not had such

a bad run since the 1993-94 season when they failed to score in five consecutive matches.

However, Bradford's home form is not impressive with only five wins in 18 matches on their own turf.

Bradford, third from bottom, are level with Wimbledon on 33 points but the Dons have a slightly better goal difference.

The Dell will be packed to its rafters as Wimbledon run the gauntlet of last-day nerves with the Crazy Gang's top-flight existence hanging in the balance.

Anything less than a win at Southampton will thrust Wimbledon's future into the hands of Bradford.

But Wimbledon, who were fined 50,000 pounds on Wednesday for February's unseemly fight with Chelsea, are in upbeat mood, confident that months of internal bickering are behind them and their destiny is in their own hands.

Skipper Kenny Cunningham, who was also on Wednesday fined 5,000 pounds for February's brawl with Chelsea's Dennis Wise, knows the onus is on his team to seize the initiative with a whole-hearted performance.

"The fact that our future is now in our own hands is a big psychological boost," the Republic of Ireland star said.

"I believe that Bradford could get something out of Liverpool. If they battle like they have all season, there's no reason why they can't win."

"Players just want to see this club in the Premier League. There's a professional satisfaction that comes from playing against the best players in the world."

"That's our motivation. We're not out to prove people wrong, we just want to make sure this club is part of the Premiership in years to come."

However, Cunningham is battling to be fit for the crunch game after limping off in the first half against Aston Villa last Saturday when a long-standing groin problem flared up.

Caretaker boss Terry Burton is already without Northern Irish star Michael Hughes, who broke his leg last weekend, and fiery Welsh striker John Hartson who is suspended.

After scoring a priceless goal in the 2-2 draw against Villa, Hartson urged the club to beat the drop and look forward to happier times.

"We've been on a bit of a slide but if we stay up we can learn a lot from this season. We can look at it and think 'let's not go wrong like we did last season,'" Hartson said.

Laurence Lowe, of the Wimbledon Independent Supporters Association said despite a small allocation for the trip to Southampton, the fans will be right behind their team.

"We've sold our full allocation at Southampton, which is only about 1,000 tickets. The supporters are behind the players. We've got to go there and win," he said.

Elsewhere, Champions Manchester United are going for the Premiership record 11th straight victory, and if they can hit the net four times away to Aston Villa they will reach 100 goals for the season.

FIXTURES:

Sunday (kick-off 1500 GMT): Aston Villa v Manchester United, Bradford v Liverpool, Chelsea v Derby, Everton v Middlesbrough, Newcastle v Arsenal, Sheffield Wednesday v Leicester, Southampton v Wimbledon, Tottenham v Sunderland, Watford v Coventry, West Ham v Leeds.

Chelsea after Kanoute

LONDON, May 12: Chelsea have joined the chase to sign Lyon striker Frederic Kanoute, reports AFP.

The 23-year-old Frenchman has been on loan to Chelsea's London rivals West Ham since January, scoring twice in seven games and West Ham manager Harry Redknapp has said he is keen to tie him up on a long-term contract.

A swap deal involving Cameroon international Marc Vivien Foe has been mooted, with Redknapp saying: "I don't want to lose Marc, but selling one or more of the players is the only way I can help bring in a couple of signings."



PLENTY OF TIME FOR THE LITTLE ONE: Superstar Ronaldo, who is undergoing an eight-month rehabilitation period following a knee surgery, feeding his one-month-old son Ronald at Milar on May 11.

— AFP photo

