

Hiddink agrees to take over ROK

SEOUL, Dec 7: Former Dutch national coach Guus Hiddink has agreed to take charge of 2002 World Cup co-hosts South Korea, the Korean Football Association said Thursday, reports AFP.

Hiddink, 54, is expected to sign a contract before South Korea take on Japan, the other World Cup hosts, in Tokyo on December 20.

The Dutchman, who guided his nation to the semi-finals of the 1998 World Cup finals, reportedly negotiated a deal under which he will choose his coaching staff.

Gazza facing six weeks on the sidelines

LONDON, Dec 7: Paul 'Gazza' Gascoigne has undergone a hernia operation which could rule him out of Everton's Premiership campaign for another six weeks, the club's official website reported Wednesday, reports AFP.

The former England star received confirmation of his injury problem from a specialist on Tuesday and was immediately admitted to hospital for surgery.

It is the second bitter blow for boss Walter Smith this week, with teenage striker Francis Jeffers having an ankle operation Tuesday which will keep him out of action until February.

The news is particularly cruel for Gascoigne after he fought his way back to peak condition following his summer arrival from Middlesbrough.

Beck says Beck is the best

LONDON, Dec 7: England and Manchester United midfielder David Beckham has been hailed as the best footballer on the planet by German legend Franz Beckenbauer, reports AFP.

The votes for the World Player of the Year award are set to be collated next week and Beckenbauer believes that last year's runner-up Beckham has done enough to reverse the placings with current title holder Rivaldo.

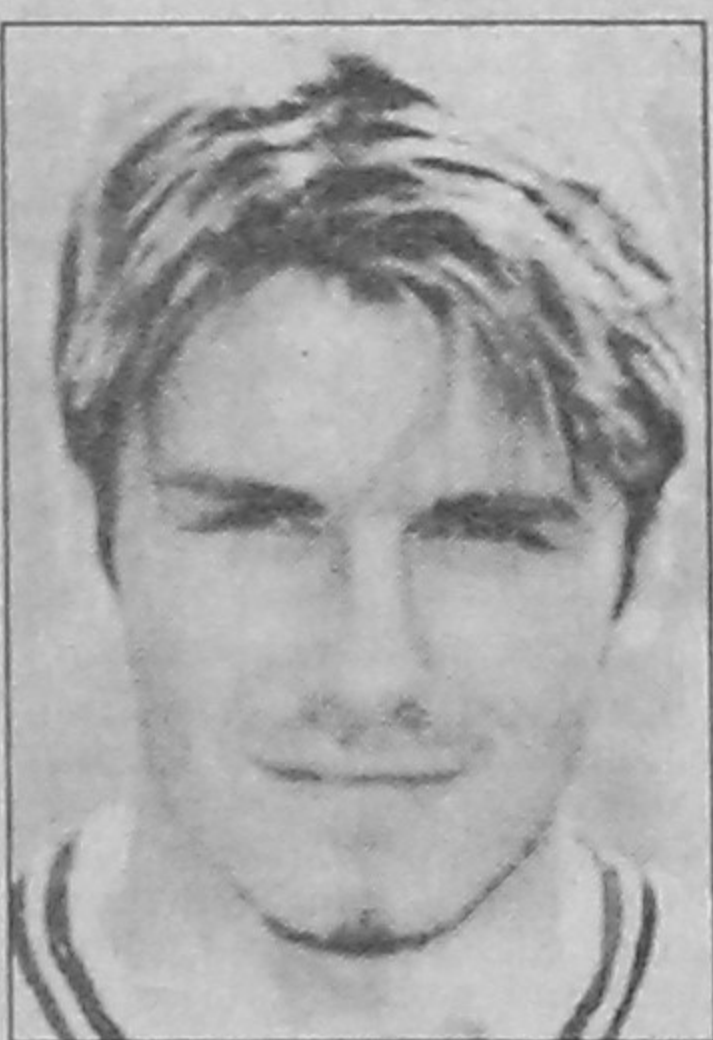
"Coming from a German, this is going to sound a little controversial," Beckenbauer told the Daily Mail newspaper Thursday.

"But my vote for the world's best footballer, if I had one, would go to Beckham."

"It's hard to compare one player against another these days, but in this week of all weeks I am prepared to be bold and state the case for this man."

"David Beckham is simply the most exciting, talented footballer in the world."

"Rivaldo and the wonderful Frenchman Zidane are undoubtedly be strong contenders. They both remain excellent players."



DAVID BECKHAM

"But Beckham has the edge this year, not just for his ability but also because of his consistency. It is impossible to ignore it these days."

"Beckham this year has been fantastic. If you look at all the great stars, they have had periods when they have had a break or haven't been at their best."

"Zidane and Rivaldo, for example, have not been at their peak for the whole season. But Beckham has not faltered."

Beckenbauer also feels that Beckham's best days are still ahead of him.

"He can continue to get better," added the World Cup winner. "I really like him. I like the way he shoots the ball and the way he passes. It's fantastic."

"He can play wide or in the middle of the field so that doesn't have to be a debate. It really depends on the tactics and ideas of the manager."

"As long as they have Beckham in the team, England will always have a chance of making progress."

Hitzfeld a la Ferguson!

BERLIN, Dec 7: Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer heaped praise on coach Ottmar Hitzfeld here Wednesday -- and said he wants to reward the manager with a long-term contract, reports AFP.

Hitzfeld, who guided Borussia Dortmund to the Champions League crown in 1997, is under contract with Bayern until June 2003.

But Beckenbauer said he wanted to extend Hitzfeld's tenure beyond his current deal and pointed to Alex Ferguson's trophy-laden 14-year reign at Manchester United as proof that stability and long-term planning pays off.



Manchester United's Trinidadian striker Dwight Yorke (front) shielding the ball from Sturm Graz's Gilbert Prilasnik at Graz on December 6. - AFP photo

United's away wait over

GRAZ, Austria, Dec 7: Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs scored in Manchester United's 2-0 win over Sturm Graz here on Wednesday night to end their away slump and put them on course for the Champions League quarter-finals, reports AFP.

United, who ended a run of seven away matches in Europe without a win since beating Bordeaux in March, top group A of this second phase.

Scholes found the net in the 17th minute in a high-profile opening spell for the midfielder for his fifth goal of the competition. Giggs put the matter beyond doubt in the 89th minute.

Dwight Yorke had United's first effort on goal which Graz keeper Kazimierz Sidorczuk held at the second attempt with Teddy Sheringham bearing down.

It was Sheringham who set up Scholes for the goal with a little flick enabling Scholes to chip Sidorczuk and end Graz's undefeated home record in the competition.

United manager Alex Ferguson has said his side are in their best form of the year and this result did nothing to detract from that view. They looked fluid during the first half when their success at keeping possession paid off.

Sheringham and Yorke looked like they might make an impact as they found themselves outmanoeuvring Graz defenders but nothing came of the move.

Yorke's cross also nearly set up Sheringham but Gunter Neukirchner did well to clear the danger before Graz moved quickly forward through Gyorgy

Korsos and Tomislav Kocijan. United finished the first half on a high with Scholes and Yorke both looking dangerous and with the side firmly in control.

Graz had a superb chance to equalize with less than 20 minutes to go when Tomislav Kocijan hit a 25m left foot shot onto the crossbar with United keeper Fabien Barthez well beaten.

A minute later Sheringham had the ball in the back of the net after Roy Keane pulled it back from the byline but the goal was disallowed.

Barthez made a superb reflex save with less than 10 minutes to go after a cross by skipper Ivica Vastic was headed powerfully goalwards as Sturm stepped up the pressure.

Giggs settled the issue however with a rasping left foot shot past Sidorczuk after being set up by Yorke to enable the Manchester man to end their 2000 European campaign on a winning note.

United will now be able to concentrate on domestic fixtures over Christmas where they are on a run of eight Premiership wins.

"We expected them to have a real go after half-time and they did that," said Ferguson.

"But we weathered it and maybe when the boy hit the bar, there was a bit of luck there, but in main we controlled it quite well - not as good as the first half, but we still had one or two chances in the second half."

"I thought the Teddy Sheringham goal should have stood because the boy passed it back, but nonetheless we have got a good result and the first (away) for a while."

Ferguson added: "I thought they acquitted themselves better in the second half and had a real go which maybe caught us off balance a little bit - carelessness at times, but not overly."

"We are very pleased. We are in a good position. We are getting better," said the United boss.

"We have six points and a double-header now against Valencia who we played last season and if we could get the same result (a draw in Spain and victory at Old Trafford), we would be delighted with that."

STANDINGS

PARIS, Dec 7 (AFP): European Champions League second round Group A & B tables after Wednesday's final matches of 2000 (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

GROUP A						
Manchester United (Eng)	2	2	0	0	5	1
Valencia (Spa)	2	1	1	0	2	0
Panathinaikos (Gre)	2	0	1	1	3	1
Sturm Graz (Aut)	2	0	0	2	0	4

GROUP B						
AC Milan (Ita)	2	1	1	0	3	2
Galatasaray (Tur)	2	1	1	0	3	2
Deportivo La Coruna (Spa)	2	1	0	1	3	2
Paris Saint Germain (Fra)	2	0	0	2	1	4

MU coming to Asia but...

SINGAPORE, Dec 7: Manchester United confirmed Thursday they will send their top squad on a three-match Asian tour next July, but the calibre of the opposition remained a mystery, reports AFP.

"The tour will be considered pre-season training, and not an end of season party," the English glamour club's chief executive Peter Kenyon said.

The opening match will be played in Kuala Lumpur on July 21, followed by fixtures in Singapore on July 24 and Bangkok on July 28.

United have been criticised for not sending a full-strength squad on previous Asian tours but Kenyon denied that would be the case in 2001, which will most likely be the Asian farewell for celebrated manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

"It will be the first team squad, and it will be Sir Alex's choice of what will be the line-up," Kenyon said, refusing to speculate whether current stars such as David Beckham, Fabien Barthez, Andy Cole and Teddy Sheringham would make the trip.

But Kenyon added: "With the 100 percent likelihood it will be the last season with Sir Alex in charge there will be an enormous level of commitment from this team."

However, it was not immediately clear who the English Premiership leaders would play, given the huge disparity between European and Asian standards.

Tour organisers, ProEvents Singapore, said a match against the Singapore national side had been ruled out, adding that the football associations in Thailand and Malaysia would make their own announcements later.

"We are trying to secure the best possible team," for the Singapore match, ProEvents managing director John Merritt said.

Football Association of Singapore marketing director Winston Lee said the side "will contain local elements," but he refused to be drawn on how many players would be imported for the one-off fixture.

The Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) said later it would put together a team mixing local and foreign players, without giving details.

"I think it is a treat for football fans to see stars like David Beckham play in the flesh," Yap Eng Keong, FAM assistant general secretary said.

"Without doubt Manchester United are the best club in the world and there is a large group of United's fans here," he told AFP.

The prospect of a turnstile flop, regardless of the opposition, is unlikely for the world's richest club, which has a huge following in Asia, far ahead of any other English club.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

PARIS, Dec 7 (AFP): Collated European Champions League second phase results on Wednesday:

Group A
Graz, Austria
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0 Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Scholes 18, Giggs 89)
Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 0 Valencia (Spa) 0

Group B
Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Davalas 51-pen) Paris Saint Germain (Fra) 0
La Coruna, Spain
Deportivo La Coruna (Spa) 0 AC Milan (Ita) (Helveg 45) 1

Shevchenko Ukraine's player of the year

KIEV, Dec 7: Ukrainian international striker Andriy Shevchenko, who plays with Italian Serie A giants AC Milan, was on Thursday named Ukrainian Player of the Year for the second consecutive year, reports AFP.

Shevchenko, who also won the award in 1997, was selected following a survey carried out by the Ukrainian Football weekly newspaper among 600 of the country's top football specialists, journalists and fans.

Shakhtar Donetsk forward Andriy Vorobel took second spot, while Ukraine's international defender Oleg Luzhny, of English Premiership side Arsenal was third.

Vampeta heads for Brazil

MILAN, Italy, Dec 7: Inter Milan's Brazilian international midfielder Vampeta, left here Wednesday for South America to start transfer negotiations with Flamengo, reports AFP.

Vampeta, capped 21 times by Brazil, has been unable to tie down a regular first team place at Inter and has frequently voiced his unhappiness at being left on the substitutes bench.

The 26-year-old has been cleared to hold transfer talks with Brazilian Flamengo by his Serie A employers. Flamengo president Edmundo dos Santos Silva has made Vampeta his major target for 2001.

FIFA appeals for specificity of sport

ZURICH, Dec 7: World football's governing body FIFA on Wednesday urged European Union (EU) leaders to make sport an exception to their usual rules, saying it cannot be viewed just in economic terms, reports AFP.

The call was timed to coincide with the EU summit which opens in Nice on Friday.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter said in a press release that sport, and football in particular, had an educational aspect regarding social integration and citizenship.

"We are not suggesting that we should somehow live outside the laws which rule our society for football itself is a reflection of society," said Blatter.

"But at the same time, sport cannot be allowed to be blindly subject to legal principles, rules or regulations which would endanger the fragile equilibrium that exists between the different sections of the football family."

Late last month, European sports commissioner Viviane Reding accused FIFA of acting like a cartel by believing that they were above the laws of national governments.

Blatter hit back to say: "FIFA cannot under any circumstances be regarded as a cartel for its very raison d'être is to preserve the global interests of a sport which has become truly universal and thus also to defend the interests of everyone concerned."

Panathinaikos hold Valencia

ATHENS, Dec 7: Greek side Panathinaikos held Spanish rivals Valencia to a goalless draw in a four European Champions League Group A match here Wednesday, reports AFP.

The Greek home team held off a furious late challenge from last season's finalists, with Norwegian forward Jhon Carew almost giving Valencia victory in the 85th minute with a firm shot from close range.

Panathinaikos' keeper Antonis Nikopolidis was alert to the danger however and managed to block the Norwegian's effort.

Valencia had nearly taken the lead on 65 minutes, but the Greek defence scrambled the ball away after a Miguel Angulo cross caused havoc in the home side's penalty area.

Panathinaikos, who are third in the group with one point, had their best chance of the night when defender Giorgos Karagounis fired in a free kick which was well saved by Santiago Cantizares in the Valencia goal.

The draw left Valencia in second place in Group A with four points from two matches. They trail leaders Manchester United who top the group with maximum points from their two games.



Umit Davala (L) of Galatasaray is being congratulated by a teammate after scoring from the spot against Paris Saint Germain at Istanbul on December 6. - AFP photo

Galatasaray pip PSG

ISTANBUL, Dec 7: A penalty from Umit Davala handed Turkish outfit Galatasaray a 1-0 Champions League win over struggling French club Paris St Germain here Wednesday, reports AFP.

Davala sidefooted home a 51st minute spotkick to finally pierce a spirited PSG, playing their first match under new coach Luis Fernandez after the sacking of Philippe Bergeroo last weekend.

The defeat leaves PSG bottom of Group B with zero points from two matches, and means they have only slender hopes of advancing to the knockout stages of the competition.

Davala's penalty came after team-mate Mario Jardel was adjudged to have been fouled in the area.

The decision looked tough

on the Parisians but they could have few grounds for complaint with the final result. Galatasaray controlled the match for long passages of play and carved out chance after chance in each half.

PSG coach Fernandez put a brave face on the defeat.

"I'm not disappointed and I saw some good things in the team tonight. I'm satisfied with the way we played... we did not crack in the way we have done in recent matches," Fernandez said.

"I was happy with the first half. The penalty hurt us but the team reacted to it well," he added.

The Turks had dominated the first 45 minutes but were thwarted by an inspired performance from PSG keeper Lionel Letizi in the visitors' goal.

The home team forced Fernandez' side onto the back foot from the outset, subjecting

Letizi to a ferocious early bombardment.

Jardel should have put the Turks in front after 13 minutes but his point blank snap shot flew over the bar.

Shortly after that Hakan Unsul met a Hasan Okan cross perfectly, but his well-timed glancing header went just wide.

The best chances continued to fall to the Turks and the Paris goal was under pressure again on 24 minutes when Okan floated a cross in for Ergun Letizi again came to the rescue, punching the ball to safety.

Okan was next to test Letizi, letting rip with a 25-yarder three minutes from halftime which the PSG goalkeeper did well to clear.

Paris' best chance of the half fell to Laurent Robert, but the forward could only header weakly at a Stephane Dalmat cross.

Milan confirm contention

LA CORUNA, Spain, Dec 7: AC Milan beat Deportivo La Coruna 1-0 here on Wednesday night to leave them still dreaming of a repeat of their 1994 Champions League glory days, reports AFP.

Denmark's Thomas Helveg shot through a crowded goal-

mouth in first half injury time to leave them top of group B of the second phase with Turks Galatasaray on four points.

AC Milan's thrashing of Barcelona in the final six years ago might be a mere memory but, with one foot in the quarter-finals and this year's final at their San Siro stadium, it could just be Milan's year.

Striker Tristan got past Paolo Maldini and pulled the ball back for Djalminha but his shot was too weak and was cleared off the line by compatriot Roque Junior.

Just before half-time, Italy's pragmatism paid off. From a corner by Croatian Zvonimir Boban, the ball cannoned into the feet of Thomas Helveg who launched a rasping shot past a surely unsighted Jose Francisco Molina from 20 metres.

In the second half, Milan cranked up the tempo. Boban, unmarked at the far post, squandered a golden opportunity set up for him by Francesco Coco.

Several moments after that Andrei Shevchenko got the better of Donato then keeper Molina but his shot hit Noureddine Naybet and Manuel Pablo saved on the goal line.

A Donato header and a Djalminha freekick were chances for the home side after the break but the moves came to nothing. Naybet and Tristan also saw two efforts, knocked away by the Italian defence.

Milan however kept Deportivo at bay to inflict Deportivo's first defeat of the competition and first loss at the Riazor stadium since January.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Both sides started cautiously in a match interrupted on the quarter-hour after a Spanish supporter threw a long, plastic pole at Milan keeper Christian Abbiati.

The incident left Abbiati more shaken than hurt, but Deportivo can expect some kind of punishment from European football's governing body UEFA.

The first real chance for either side came after 32 minutes when Brazilian Djalminha got the better of three Milan players, before setting up Victor who fed Diego Tristan.

Striker Tristan got past Paolo Maldini and pulled the ball back for Djalminha but his shot was too weak and was cleared off the line by compatriot Roque Junior.

Just before half-time, Italy's pragmatism paid off. From a corner by Croatian Zvonimir Boban, the ball cannoned into the feet of Thomas Helveg who launched a rasping shot past a surely unsighted Jose Francisco Molina from 20 metres.

In the second half, Milan cranked up the tempo. Boban, unmarked at the far post, squandered a golden opportunity set up for him by Francesco Coco.

Several moments after that Andrei Shevchenko got the better of Donato then keeper Molina but his shot hit Noureddine Naybet and Manuel Pablo saved on the goal line.

A Donato header and a Djalminha freekick were chances for the home side after the break but the moves came to nothing. Naybet and Tristan also saw two efforts, knocked away by the Italian defence.

Milan however kept Deportivo at bay to inflict Deportivo's first defeat of the competition and first loss at the Riazor stadium since January.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

Diego Tristan (R), the Deportivo La Coruna striker, going past the tackle of AC Milan's Zvonimir Boban at La Coruna on December 6.

However, the statement also said FIFA's current regulations must "abide by the rules set down by the (European Union) principle of the free movement of goods, persons and services."

FIFA requested the postponement after its initial proposals, including a compensation system for the development of players under the age of 23 and an arbitration panel to rule on fees in cross-border moves, although "forming a good basis for further dialogue", proved insignificantly detailed for the EC.

There are also concerns over a suggestion that international transfers for players under 18, another central component of FIFA's proposals, would be a further violation of the freedom of movement of all European Union citizens.

Differences in opinion between FIFA and the Commission became apparent at an initial meeting on November 22, which also involved UEFA representatives and delegates from both FIFPro, a player's union, and the professional leagues.

Later Wednesday the EC said in a press release the stability of contracts between clubs and players is "of the utmost importance" for the football industry.

UEFA and the professional leagues remain firmly committed to continuing their work on this matter in order to find a mutually satisfactory solution.

But the delay took UEFA officials by surprise, prompting the body's chief executive Gerhard Aigner to fire off a letter to both FIFA and the EC.

In a statement released on UEFA's website, Aigner said UEFA wanted to record its "great surprise" that Wednesday's meeting had been postponed.

UEFA and the professional leagues remain firmly committed to continuing their work on this matter in order to find a mutually satisfactory solution.

But the delay took UEFA officials by surprise, prompting the body's chief executive Gerhard Aigner to fire off a letter to both FIFA and the EC.

In a statement released on UEFA's website, Aigner said