

Blair blasts EC transfer reform plans

LONDON, Dec 12: British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Monday said the European Commission's proposals on reforming the football transfer system were "misguided and wrong" and added they must be changed to prevent smaller clubs from going bust, reports AFP.

The EC - the executive body of the European Union - has declared the current transfer system contravenes its employment laws because it fails to allow all workers to ply their trade freely in the Union.

Former British sports minister Tony Banks raised the issue during a House of Commons debate Monday about the Prime Minister's statement on the EU summit in Nice.

Banks asked Blair about the outcome of his negotiations with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder about the proposed reform to the transfer system.

Blair said: "Myself and the German chancellor are wholly opposed to the (European Commission's) proposals. I think they are misguided and wrong, and we need to make sure that we get them changed."

"For many of the clubs the transfer fee system is essential for their future, and we do not want to see a situation where we have smaller clubs go to the wall as a result of a misguided intervention."

Europe's lower-division clubs have argued that receiving transfer fees from bigger clubs is essential for their survival.

Many observers fear the sport game will be plunged into chaos because the Commission's demands for reform could prompt a free-for-all as players move between clubs at will.

The Commission has rejected proposals from FIFA, football's world governing body, which included 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.

FA to probe Kachoulou clash

LONDON, Dec 12: The English Football Association (FA) confirmed Monday that it is to investigate an incident surrounding the sending-off of Southampton's Hassan Kachoulou during his side's 1-0 win over Leeds at The Dell on Saturday, reports AFP.

The Moroccan international appeared to aim a head-butt at Leeds midfielder Lee Bowyer after the 'Southampton' player was given his marching orders by referee Paul Durkin.

Kachoulou received his second yellow card following a clash which also saw Leeds' Alan Smith and Southampton's Mark Draper booked.

The referee has asked the FA to take a look at a video towards the end of the game, said FA spokesman Adrian Bevington.

"We have called for a copy of the video and that will be processed to three members of the Video Advisory Panel for them to make their recommendations from that."

A bad-tempered encounter at The Dell boiled over when Leeds did not return the ball to the home team after it had been kicked out of play to allow Kachoulou's Morocco team-mate Tahar El Khalef to receive treatment.

Match-fixing charges

Second Singapore player in court

SINGAPORE, Dec 10: German footballer Lutz Pfannenstiel Monday denied accusations of match-fixing in S-League matches, which could land him in jail for up to five years if found guilty, a report said, reports AFP.

Pfannenstiel, the goalkeeper for Geylang United in the S-League competition, appeared in court accused of accepting 18,000 Singapore dollars (10,400 US) to rig results, the Straits Times reported on its website.

His flatmate, Australian Mirko Jurilj who played for Sembawang Rangers, was sentenced to five months' jail last Friday after being found guilty on similar charges involving the same bookmaker.

Both men were arrested during a widespread investigation which exposed the corrupt underbelly of football in Singapore.

At least 15 other players and officials are said to be under suspicion.

The bookmaker, 28-year-old Sivakumar Madasamy, had testified that he offered to help Pfannenstiel win money by placing bets on his behalf.

But the German said he only gave Madasamy his 'professional opinion' on the possible outcome of matches and never discussed betting or scoring margins.

"I only gave him my opinion. I never mentioned about scoring. I only told him who I thought could win," Pfannenstiel said.

In Jurilj's trial, Madasamy told the court he outlaid the 22,000 dollars in three bets, but the money was lost when the results did not go as planned.

Jurilj signed a confession while in custody, which he later claimed was made under duress.

Pfannenstiel said he had not signed a confession.



DIVIDED GREATS: An AFP combo picture of football legends Diego Maradona (L) and Pele after receiving their Player of the Century trophies at the FIFA gala in Rome on December 11.

Legends' war rages on

ROME, Dec 12: Diego Maradona walked out of a FIFA awards ceremony on Monday before his great rival Pele got up on stage to receive recognition as one of the 20 greatest players of the century, reports Reuters.

In what appeared to be a clear snub to the Brazilian, Maradona left the gala event in Rome early after collecting his own prize as the best player of the century as voted by fans on FIFA's official website.

When Pele took the stage to accept a parallel prize based on votes by FIFA officials, journalists and coaches, he was faced with Maradona's empty front row seat.

"I would have liked to have had Maradona up here on stage with me but it looks like he's already gone," the great Brazilian said.

When pressed, Pele declined to name the Argentine as the best player of the past century while Maradona only named Pele alongside a host of other players.

Pele topped a poll of FIFA's Football Family. He took 72.75 per cent of the vote to 9.75 per cent for Argentine Alfredo Di Stefano and just six per cent for Maradona.

Maradona took the web-based vote with 53.60 per cent to only 18.53 per cent for Pele.

The volatile Argentine, who flew in from Buenos Aires for the ceremony, dedicated his victory to his compatriots, his wife, Cuban leader Fidel Castro and "all the footballers of the world whom I respect with all my soul".

Maradona was unrepentant this morning. "I had the vote of the people," he said, before leaving the stage and the hall.

The stand-off between the two giants of world soccer came after weeks of rancour over the terms of the FIFA awards.

World soccer's governing body initially planned to name just one player of the century and Argentine, spurred by media reports, were convinced Maradona had won it.

That outraged Brazilians who argued the terms of the web-based vote were unfair and claimed the Argentine Football Federation had led a concerted campaign to swing the vote Maradona's way.

FIFA, apparently anxious to defuse the controversy, then announced on its website the award would be for a "player of the decade." It then changed tack again and said the change was simply due to a typing error.

"(The announcement on the website) should have read decades rather than decade," an association spokesman said, implying the terms of the vote never changed. Pele seemed little inclined to praise Maradona when he arrived at the gala on Monday.

"We're not great friends but I admire him," he said. "If he thinks he's the best player of the century that's his problem."

Asked who he would have chosen as the century's greatest player, Maradona said that as an Argentine he would be tempted to choose Di Stefano, part of the great Real Madrid side of the 1950s and 1960s.

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Ronaldo fined for drink driving

SAN SEBASTIAN, Spain, Dec 12: Inter Milan's Ronaldo tested positive in a drink driving test in Spain during the night of Saturday to Sunday, Marca sports newspaper reported on Tuesday, reports AFP.

Brazil's 1996 and 1997 FIFA world player of the year on Saturday left Capbreton in south western France where he was being treated for a long-standing knee injury.

He joined friends at a top restaurant in Basque town St Sebastian across the Spanish border before finishing off his night out at a disco in the town centre, still according to Marca.

He then left for France in a four-wheel drive vehicle but was stopped by police while still in Spain and failed a random drink driving test.

He immediately paid an 18,000-peseta (95-dollar) fine and one of his friends had to drive the car back to Capbreton.

Real are the greatest

ROME, Dec 12: European champions Real Madrid were voted the FIFA team of the 20th century on Monday, reports Reuters.

Real won the award with 42.35 per cent of the vote, way ahead of Manchester United in second place with 9.69 per cent and Bayern Munich with 9.18 per cent.

Real's great Spanish rivals Barcelona were fourth with 5.61 per cent while Pele's former club Santos were joint fifth with Ajax Amsterdam on 5.10 per cent.

Juventus were the top Italian side in the poll, placing seventh with 2.55 per cent.

Argentine Alfredo Di Stefano, part of the great Real Madrid sides of the 1950s and 60s, and club president Florentino Perez were at a FIFA gala in Rome to accept the award.

Nice guy Radebe

ROME, Dec 12: South Africa's Lucas Radebe, who plays for English Premiership club Leeds United, on Monday received the FIFA fair-play award for his fight against racism in football, reports AFP.

Italian Antonio Mattarese, president of FIFA's security commission, said: "Radebe is not only an excellent player, but a great personality off the pitch and a man with a big heart for children all over the world."

The 31-year-old Radebe is generally known to put in a great deal of time working with children in the Soweto township near Johannesburg.

On the international front, the former Kaiser Chiefs defender, who made his South African debut against Mexico seven years ago, has now played 61 matches and the last 30 as skipper.

Olyroos coach bids bye

SYDNEY, Dec 12: Raul Blanco, coach of Australia's failed Olympic Games football team, Tuesday parted ways with Soccer Australia, reports AFP.

Blanco was not expected to have his contract renewed after the Australian under-23 team failed to win any of their three games at the Sydney Olympics last September.

The Argentine-born Blanco took the blame and Soccer Australia Tuesday announced he would lose the job when his contract expired at the end of this month, ending a 20-year association with national teams.

Blanco knew he had to go but refused to look for excuses even though there were some events beyond his control.

"You only have regrets when you have not given your best and I have always given my best," Blanco said Tuesday.

"Results are what keep people in jobs and what don't keep people in jobs."

"You have to accept sometimes that people have to make a tough decision, that's part of life."

Expectations in the Olympics were high but they were damaged when key over-age players, Leeds United striker Harry Kewell and Middlesbrough's Paul Okon pulled out through injury before the tournament and the full squad only assembled days before the match against Italy.

There is no rush to replace Blanco as Australia are unlikely to start their next campaign for the 2004 Athens Olympics for at least another year.

National team coach Frank Farina has said that he wanted to become more involved in the Olympic team to cast his eye over future Soccerroos.

Uruguay's proposal to fight AIDS

MONTEVIDEO, Dec 12: Transfers of Uruguayan footballers abroad could be taxed at 10 per cent under a government proposal to finance the country's fight against AIDS, senator Alejandro Athurgary said Monday, reports AFP.

Athurgary, a member of the country's centre-right government, said that the tax existed in other countries in one form or another and could be used to purchase medicines.

Missing 'El Phenom'

MILAN, Dec 12: Reuters/Inter Milan. When FIFA name their World Player of the Year, the man regarded as the best footballer of his generation will probably not have won a single vote.

The name Ronaldo may still feature on the replica soccer shirts of teenagers across the world, but it has been seen on a football field for just six minutes this year.

The Inter Milan striker, twice voted the best player in the world, is still dealing with the consequences of those six minutes of action.

After a near five-month absence following a knee operation, Ronaldo came on as a substitute in the Italian Cup final against Lazio in Rome in April, only to be carried off when that knee collapsed in the middle of his first real piece of action.

His leg gave way just as he was showing a tantalising taste of the old Ronaldo -- running goalwards, his upper body swerving from side to side and defenders backing off, uncertain of what he was going to do next.

Television archives are full of the great goals Ronaldo has scored from such runs, whether as a teenage prodigy with PSV Eindhoven, or as the idol of the Nou Camp crowd in Barcelona and later at the San Siro, home to Inter.

THE PHENOMENON But after those six minutes, while the likes of Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo and Brazil's Rivaldo have shown why they are considered the cream of the crop, and will be vying for FIFA's prize on Monday, Ronaldo's work takes place far from the stadiums and television cameras.

The Brazilian's home for the moment is the French coastal town of Capbreton, close to the Spanish border, which hosts an exclusive sports clinic and training centre.

"This centre is magnificent," Ronaldo recently told Gazzetta dello Sport. "I don't know of any other place in the world as complete as this."

Under the eye of a team of physiotherapists and specialist training and medical staff, Ronaldo carries out eight hours of work, six days a week.

"Here I do everything that I need to do to get back to playing at the best level as soon as possible. But at the end of the days I feel cooked," said the Brazilian.

Aside from the facilities, the centre also shields him from the pressures of supporters and the media. Staff have been instructed by Inter not to discuss the player's progress and access to the centre is strictly controlled.

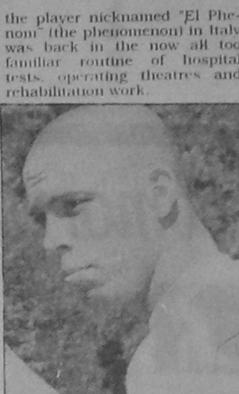
MEDIA FIGURE But even with his absence from the field, Ronaldo remains a media figure.

The birth of his son Ronaldo, a week before his injury, was a media event with cameras in the maternity ward at the Milan hospital and Inter launching an online message service for the fans.

He has also devoted time to supporting children's charities and even backed theatrical performances in Brazil.

Those replica shirts, whether in the gold of Brazil or the black and blue stripes of Inter, prove that people still want a piece of Ronaldo.

A souvenir stall outside the San Siro sells unofficial Ronaldo tee-shirts for five dollars. But its slogan sums up the feeling of everyone at FIFA's award ceremony: "Don't Give Up."



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Akers acres ahead of the rest

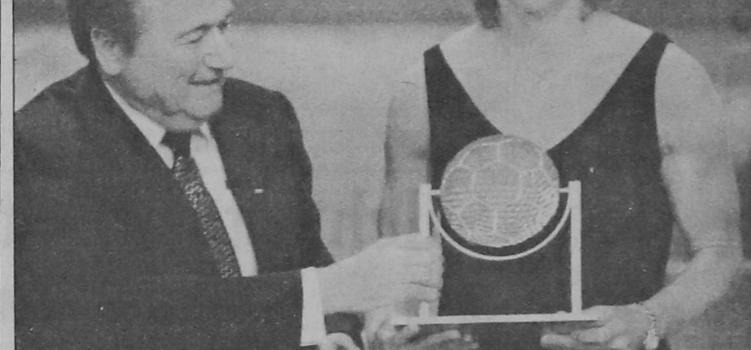
ROME, Dec 12 (AFP): The United States Michelle Akers, named women footballer of the century here Monday, was ahead of her time as an athlete.

An immediately recognizable figure with her flowing curls, the five-foot-10-inch player combined speed and strength with unparalleled ball skills to become feared and respected by opponents around

she dominated the competition in China to earn the Golden Boot.

She changed roles leading up to the 1996 Olympics, dropping into the midfield where her play-making skills and composure on the ball could be more utilized while the beatings she took with her back to the goal would be reduced.

Her superior feel for the game, her long-range scoring ability, her dominance in the air and her strong tackling pres-



FIFA president Sepp Blatter (L) handing over the trophy of the Woman Footballer of the Century to US striker Michelle Akers during the award gala in Rome on December 11. - AFP photo

ence were all on display during the 1996 Olympics and 1999 Women's World Cup.

But Akers, born in Santa Clara, California, on February 1, 1966, forged her brilliant career in the face of injury and illness.

She endured more than a dozen knee operations, concussions, a broken cheekbone and related surgery, and, finally, a dislocated shoulder that, coupled with her ongoing battle with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), ended her international

She is one of just four women to score more than 100 goals in international play, her 105 pitting her a tie for third all-time with long-retired Italian Carolina Morace.

She scored her 100th against Portugal on January 30, 1999, in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, more than 14 years after she scored her first, on August 21, 1985, in a 2-2 draw with Denmark in the United States' second-ever women's international match.

The Turin club's performance in his absence proved how dependent they are on him.

France also badly faltered during their Euro 2000 qualification campaign during the four matches when Zidane was sidelined by injury.

His closest friends in football are fellow French international Christophe Dugarry and Uruguayan Juventus team-mate Paolo Montero.

Zidane rose to prominence with Bordeaux, featuring in the team that reached the UEFA Cup final in 1996.

That summer it was Juventus who won the race to sign him and he has won the Italian league title, the Intercontinental Cup and two FIFA World Player of the Year trophies. Few doubt that there will be more silverware to come before the balding playmaker decides to call it a day.

He has already won France's ultimate award, the Legion d'Honneur, the Golden Ball and now two FIFA World Player of the Year trophies. Few doubt that there will be more silverware to come before the balding playmaker decides to call it a day.

His performance in the 2-1 final victory over Italy was arguably his least impressive in the tournament but no-one disputed his right to be considered best player once more.

With Juventus too he has been outstanding although his year has also had its downside with two sendings-off in the

WORLD PLAYERS

ROME, Dec 12: Following are the previous winners of FIFA's World Player of the Year award, reports Xinhua.

1991: Lothar Matthaeus (Germany, Inter Milan)

1992: Marco van Basten (Netherlands, AC Milan)

1993: Roberto Baggio (Italy, Juventus)

1994: Romario (Brazil, Barcelona)

1995: George Weah (Liberia, AC Milan)

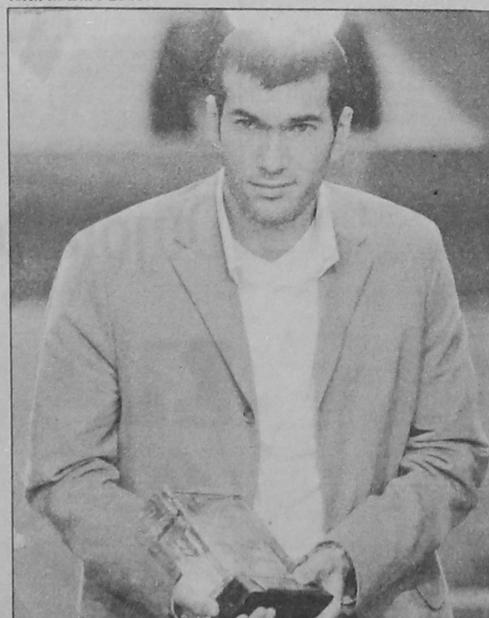
1996: Ronaldo (Brazil, Barcelona)

1997: Ronaldo (Brazil, Inter Milan)

1998: Zinedine Zidane (France, Juventus)

1999: Rivaldo (Brazil, Barcelona)

2000: Zinedine Zidane (France, Juventus)



Mercurial France and Juventus playmaker Zinedine Zidane, who was named the World Footballer of the Year, with his memento during the FIFA gala in Rome on December 11. - AFP photo