

UEFA's no to 'Atlantic League'

LAUSANNE, Switzerland, Dec 15: European football's governing body UEFA has decided to begin work immediately on reforming the format of the Champions League and the UEFA Cup, officials said Friday, reports AFP.

However, UEFA's executive committee meeting in Lausanne rejected proposals from a group of big clubs from smaller nations for a so-called Atlantic League.

The work to reduce the size of the Champions League, which UEFA accepts includes too many matches in its current format, should be finished by the end of 2001, UEFA said.

The new form of the competitions will not begin until July 2003.

"The Champions League in its current format has reached the end of its life," said UEFA's general secretary Gerhard Aigner.

"We must find a new formula in which there will be fewer matches."

Aigner said UEFA had rejected the Atlantic League proposal because football fans in the six countries would never accept the major disruption to their domestic leagues that such a league could cause.

Clubs from Belgium, Denmark, Scotland, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden put forward the proposal because they fear that the power of the Champions League, the competition which brings together Europe's biggest clubs, could lead to a worsening of the standard in their domestic competitions.

"The officials from these clubs have nothing against UEFA, but they wanted more receipts and a more attractive competition," Aigner said.

"But they have forgotten an essential point, that the sole judge of football is the supporter. How are the supporters going to react if we take away the tradition of derbies?"

UEFA has invited the clubs to put forward new proposals to try to reduce the problems of leagues who are suffering financially compared to Europe's leading leagues in Italy, Germany, Spain, England and France.

West Ham fail in Keane bid

LONDON, Dec 15: English Premiership club West Ham on Friday failed in a 10 million pound (14 million dollar) bid to sign striker Robbie Keane from Inter Milan, reports AFP.

Hammers boss Harry Redknapp has money burning a hole in his pocket following the 18 million pound (25 million dollar) sale of Rio Ferdinand to Leeds.

"We went over to Italy and had a meet with the people from Milan and made an offer of 10 million pounds but we couldn't quite agree terms with them," said Redknapp.

"It wasn't far away I don't think, but I don't know if they really want to sell the boy any-



ROBBIE KEANE way to be fair. "And I don't know if the boy wants to leave - I think he probably wants to stay there."

Redknapp told the official West Ham website, "We met with the people from Milan and I'd have loved to have bought him; he is a fantastic player."

"We'd still like to do something if ever the chance came but if it will don't know."

"He would fit in anywhere. He would have been a great player for us. He is quality and you want quality players."

"He is top class, a fantastic talent and he has only just turned 20 years of age."

"But at the end of the day it is what the boy wants to do and I think there are lots of other clubs in for him in England. But I don't know if he wants to leave Italy."

Venables wants Anderton

LONDON, Dec 15: Middlesbrough coach Terry Venables hinted Friday he could enter the race for England midfielder Darren Anderton's signature if he becomes available on a free transfer, reports AFP.

The 28-year-old, who is currently enjoying a relatively injury-free spell at Tottenham, is out of contract at the end of the season and will be able to start talking to prospective employers in the New Year.

And while Venables, who has worked with Anderton at both Spurs and during his time as England boss, has made no move as yet for a player he regards highly, he admits he could well be interested as he attempts, along with Bryan Robson, to resurrect Middlesbrough's fortunes.

Serie A preview

Rome takes centre-stage



MILAN, Dec 15: Lazio host Olympic Stadium co-tenants AS Roma on Sunday night in a Roman derby that for once has far more than mere city pride riding on it, reports AFP.

The match between the eternal footballing rivals of the Eternal City is always a passionate affair but this year it also marks the contest between the reigning Italian champions and the current leaders of the Serie A table.

The significance of the clash can be gauged by a quick glance at the players on show -



HERNAN CRESPO

but a quick look at the VIP section of the main stand will also confirm just how big the appeal of this encounter is.

Roma's Gabriel Batistuta and Francesco Totti will do battle with Lazio's Alessandro Nesta and Hernan Crespo in the field while in the stands it is the likes of Hollywood stars Cameron Diaz, Leonardo Di Caprio and Daniel Day-Lewis who will be ensuring the photographers will have their work cut out even when the action subsides on the field.

Football in Italy has long had a northern bias with Turin giants Juventus and Milan clubs AC and Inter traditionally the dominant forces in the domestic game.

But with Lazio last season

winning their first title for 26 years and AS Roma soaring to a six-point lead and threatening to win their first Scudetto in 18 years this term it is clear that all footballing roads in Italy are currently leading to Rome.

Roma have been 100 percent at the Olympic Stadium with their only setbacks in 10 matches a defeat at the San Siro against Inter Milan and a draw at Perugia but this time they will be occupying the away dressing room as Lazio are technically the home side.

The hosts, also struggling in the Champions League this term, are so far failing to mount a successful defence of their title this term.

Their midweek elimination in the Italian Cup at the hands of Udinese has only fuelled the sense of unease at the club since their Swedish coach Sven Goran Eriksson announced he would leave to become England coach in the summer.

Lazio president Sergio Cragnotti, a tomato sauce baron, upped the ante by saying: "We must win this match at all costs. We need a win to recover our confidence. It is a critical moment for us we can not allow a further failure."

Some papers are already saying that defeat by Roma would precipitate Eriksson's departure but the Scandinavian has been boosted by the news that Portuguese defender Fernando Couto is available after his three-match suspension was reduced to two games on appeal.

Victory for Lazio could give the defending champions the kickstart their season needs and would also be the first real warning shot for Roma who also have a very tough fixture against Juventus next week.

The Turin side have a relatively easy trip to Lecce and victory in that game would mean they would go level on points with Roma should they win at the Olympic Stadium against Fabio Capello's side on December 23.

Juve have the added advantage of being eliminated from the Champions League. That could prove a blessing in disguise as they focus all their efforts on the domestic prize.

Level with Juventus in second are Atalanta and the Bergamo side make the trip to Bologna on Sunday afternoon. The hosts are still without injured

striker Giuseppe Signori but Cameroonian Pierre Wome is fit to return for the first time in a month.

Inter Milan will be aware that only victory will do at home to Brescia given their 2-0 defeat at Fiorentina last weekend.

With the imminent opening of the Christmas transfer market it is now apparent that coach Marco Tardelli will have to wheel and deal if he is to turn arguably the biggest underachievers in the division into a force to be reckoned with in the new era.

Tardelli has already conceded defeat in the title race and before Thursday night's



GABRIEL BATISTUTA

Italian Cup match with Parma the coach and his charges were stoned as they approached the San Siro in the team bus.

While Inter are still mired in mediocrity their San Siro co-tenants AC Milan are beginning to put a fine run together and they will hope to keep in the same winning vein when they visit Verona.

Parma host Vicenza after seeing their fine recent run halted by Juventus last week while Udinese and Fiorentina clash in another appetising clash.

The two matches on Saturday are relatively low key affairs with Napoli hoping to increase Reggina's woes at the San Paolo Stadium while Bari make the trip to Perugia.

FIXTURES (14:00 GMT unless stated):

Saturday: Napoli v Reggina, Perugia v Bari (19:30)

Sunday: Bologna v Atalanta, Inter Milan v Brescia, Lecce v Juventus, Parma v Vicenza, Udinese v Fiorentina, Verona v AC Milan, Lazio v AS Roma (19:30)

Fans attack Inter bus

MILAN, Italy, Dec 15: A Molotov cocktail was hurled Thursday evening at the team coach carrying the Inter Milan side to the second leg of their Italian Cup quarter-final with Parma at the San Siro, the club revealed on its website, reports AFP.

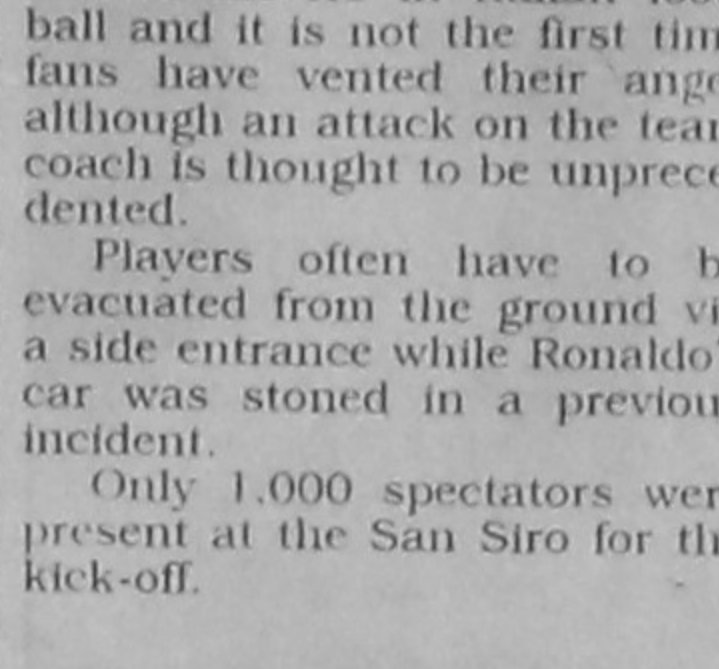
The Inter team, who lost the first leg 6-1 to Parma, were subjected to the incident as the coach entered the subway leading to the dressing room area.

A fire was quickly extinguished by police and the players and coach Marco Tardelli were unscathed and security staff chased the culprit, believed to be an Inter fan.

Inter, who have twice broken the world record transfer fee in the last three years when signing Brazilian Ronaldo and Italian Christian Vieri, have been long considered the biggest underachievers in Italian football and it is not the first time fans have vented their anger although an attack on the team coach is thought to be unprecedented.

Players often have to be evacuated from the ground via a side entrance while Ronaldo's car was stoned in a previous incident.

Only 1,000 spectators were present at the San Siro for the kick-off.



SIR ALEX FERGUSON

there this season. Gerard Houllier's men have picked up just five points on their travels from a possible 24 so the odds heavily favour United.

United coach Sir Alex Ferguson has insisted Norwegian striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is not for sale ahead of Sunday's crunch clash.

The United boss still considers Solskjaer as a major part of his line-up, even though the forward has made just six Premiership starts this season.

Solskjaer, who scored in the 3-3 draw against Charlton last Saturday, will spearhead United's attack alongside Teddy



NWANKWO KANU

Shanku to 19 because the association has extreme financial problems.

However, NFA spokesman Austin Mgbolu refused to give any reasons for Kanu's exclusion from the Nations Cup qualifier due here January 13.

Kanu's inclusion in the national team set-up by Bonfrere has been a subject of debate since the striker refused appeals to play for Nigeria at the Sydney Olympics in September, preferring to play for his club.

Top sports officials including the sports minister demanded that Kanu be dropped from the team by the coach as punishment for refusing to play in Sydney.

Bonfrere has insisted in interviews in recent weeks that the former African Footballer of the Year is important in the country's campaign for both the World Cup and Nations Cup.

He also blamed Kanu's English club for putting pressure on the player to stay away from the Olympics.

Ronaldo making good progress



MILAN, Dec 15: Brazilian striker Ronaldo is progressing well in Paris after leaving the Capbreton clinic in south west France where he has been treated for six weeks on his long-term knee injury, the website of his Italian club Inter Milan reported Thursday, reports AFP.

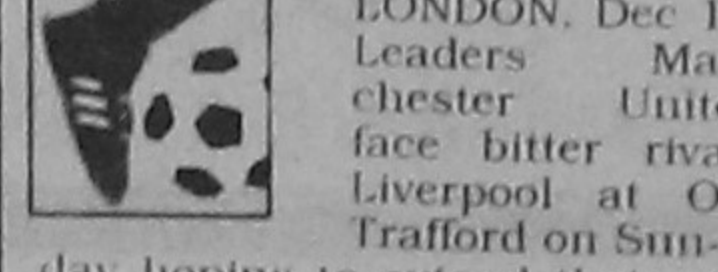
The forward arrived in the French capital on Wednesday night accompanied by Inter club doctor Franco Combi and physiotherapist Milton Petroni and he underwent a magnetic resonance scan at the Des Lillas Clinic.

The result of the scan is very good; the knee is responding just as we expected," said Combi.

On Friday the Brazilian will attend the Pitié Salpêtrière Hospital, where he underwent an operation on April 13. He will undergo a further scan and make his monthly visit to Doctor Gerard Saillaut.

Premiership preview

Can Liverpool break the pattern?



LONDON, Dec 15: Leaders Manchester United face bitter rivals Liverpool at Old Trafford on Sunday hoping to extend their six-point lead at the top of the Premiership, reports AFP.

The reigning champions have 40 points after 17 matches, six more than second-placed Arsenal who travel to Tottenham on Monday for the north London derby.

Liverpool will certainly have to fight for a share of the points as no team have won a league game at Old Trafford for over two years and only Chelsea have managed to win a point

playing against Arsenal," said Freund.

"This is a wonderful game for every player because it is one of the biggest derbies in the world and I am very proud to be on the pitch."

"I remember last season how the crowd got behind the team. I didn't play in the home game but it was a wonderful feeling just to be there."

"If I play against Patrick Vieira - I met him in a restaurant two weeks ago - it will be a very important clash in the middle of the park."

Middlesbrough coach Terry Venables will be looking to end a run of nine defeats in 10 league outings at home to Lon-

doners Chelsea at the Riverside Stadium.

The former England boss, who was brought in to assist manager Bryan Robson could not have picked a better team for his home debut - Chelsea are one of only two teams in the Premiership who have failed to win away from home.

FIXTURES (kick-off 15:00GMT unless stated):

Saturday: Aston Villa v Manchester City, Derby v Coventry, Everton v West Ham, Ipswich v Southampton, Leeds v Sunderland, Leicester v Charlton, Middlesbrough v Chelsea, Newcastle v Bradford

Sunday: Manchester Utd v Liverpool (12:00GMT)

Monday: Tottenham v Arsenal (2:00GMT)

But it is unlikely Arsene Wenger's side will have such an easy ride against their north London neighbours who have an impressive record on home soil.

Spurs have won seven and drawn one of their eight league games at White Hart Lane while Arsenal have won just twice away from Highbury in the Premiership.

Tottenham's German midfielder Steffen Freund is relishing the task ahead, particularly the challenge of stopping Arsenal's French international Patrick Vieira pulling the strings in midfield.

"I always look forward to

French First Division preview

Lens test for Bordeaux



PARIS, Dec 15: Sedan have a chance to grab top spot this Saturday as the eastern French side count on home advantage against visiting basement boys Strasbourg while league leaders Bordeaux have it all to do as they visit the football hotbed of Lens, reports AFP.

The top of the French league is proving impossible to predict at the moment and Bordeaux, sitting one point ahead of closest rivals Sedan, could find themselves once more playing catch-up.

Sedan have two factors in their favour. The 'Wild Boars' as they are affectionately known, have a fully-fit squad, with only midfielder Marthin Verschuere evoking cause for concern.

Perhaps more pertinently, Strasbourg's influential Paraguayan international goalkeeper Jose-Luis Chilavert, walked off training on Wednesday with a knee injury, and is unlikely to feature, handing the Sedan strike force of Pius N'Diell and Cedric Mionnet a slightly less formidable target in replacement.

Bordeaux, meanwhile, will not go down without a fight at the blood and gold-draped Felix-Bollaert stadium.

And if Bordeaux's Brazilian forward Pauleta - who has scored nine goals overall to sit tied third in the scorer's charts - has any say in the matter, the Girondins will leave Lens having at least got on the scoresheet.

Paris Saint Germain's ever-philosophical coach Luis Fernandez has the arduous task of lifting his players' morale for the Sunday visit to Bastia.

The Corsicans are known for having the most beautiful island in the Mediterranean, but Bastia's hospitality will fall short of according their visitors a pleasant stay as they try to maintain sixth spot.

Paris SG's cause is not helped by the fact that they went down 2-0 to Lille in midweek, in a rescheduled match which proved that the north-east men don't have the best defence in the league (14 goals conceded) for nothing.

But even in defeat Fernandez was chipper about Paris's future.

"I take my hat off to Lille, they deserved the victory. My players' efforts didn't disappoint me... and although Lille proved too strong on the night, my players didn't abandon me."

Sooner or later, PSG will begin to capitalise in our away encounters.

Bastia, whose home record has been bolstered by a midweek 3-1 over Nantes, and recent wins over Auxerre and Lyon, are not about to help Fernandez's cause.

As the news of French football's efforts to weed out rogue players with phony European Union (EU) passports came filtering through midweek, Marseille coach Javier Clemente empathised.

But as the league begins its quest to check the authenticity of the 'EU' passports of 78 professional players in Division one and two, Clemente

was more concerned with weeding out his own 'undesirables'.

Saturday's away trip to Guingamp, who sit in eighth place, could provide the Spanish taskmaster with an element of who is first out of the door.

But reports from Marseille this week suggest that Clemente already knows who is superfluous to requirements.

A report in La Provence newspaper even went as far as suggesting that club president Robert Louis-Dreux is looking to hire Aston Villa's unhappy hit-man David Ginola.

For league newcomers Guingamp, any news of an upturn in Marseille's fortunes will be irrelevant as they attempt to capitalise on home advantage after holding champions Monaco to a 2-2 draw last week.

Le Championnat has seen its fair share of sackings this season - five to be exact.

But heads can still roll and this week, if John Toshack fails to inspire Saint Etienne to a home win over visitors Auxerre, the Welsh journeyman could find himself looking for yet another job.

Saint Etienne, who looked so promising and verdant at the start of the season, are now a slightly sickly green and in need of a win after failing to grab only one win from their last four matches.

Champions Monaco have Ludovic Guily and defender Philippe Christanval suspended. Forwards Nicolas Bonal, Dado Prso and defender Martin Djeter are all injured while defender Pablo Contreras and midfielder Marcelo Gallardo are uncertain.

However, coach Claude Puel, whose foreign legion of players will come in for special attention from those passport investigators, will be able to rely on the talents of John-Arne Rise.

The 20-year-old Norwegian international forward came off the bench to hand Monaco a point by scoring with only three minutes to go in their eventual 2-2 draw with Guingamp last week.

In Saturday's remaining matches Metz, sitting precariously in the relegation zone in 16th place, welcome on-form Lille, while Lyon, who were celebrating after their 4-1 home win over Toulouse midweek, make the short trip to Troyes.

On Sunday, Nantes-placed Atlantic coast side fourth will be hoping to make up for two back-to-back defeats as they play host to Toulouse, who make up the trio of teams sitting in the relegation zone, in 17th place.

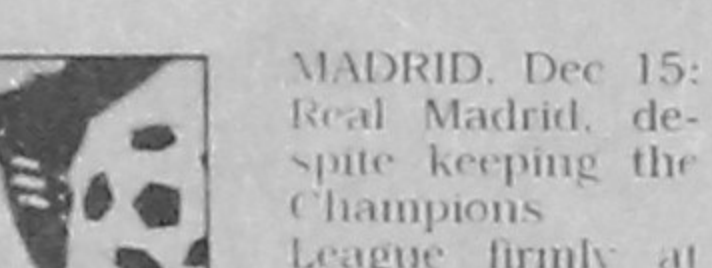
FIXTURES (16:15 GMT): Guingamp v Marseille

Saturday (19:00 GMT): Lens v Bordeaux, Sedan v Strasbourg, Metz v Lille, Saint Etienne v Auxerre, Monaco v Rennes, Troyes v Lyon

Sunday: Nantes v Toulouse (17:30 GMT), Bastia v Paris SG (19:45 GMT)

Primera Liga preview

Real need to be serious



MADRID, Dec 15: Real Madrid, despite keeping the Champions League firmly at the top of this

season's shopping list, will look to shrug off the minor embarrassment of a midweek Cup loss at Third Division Toledo when they face Espanyol on Saturday, reports AFP.

The reigning European champions are currently third in the table, two points adrift of joint leaders Valencia and Deportivo La Coruna but the league form of the 'meringues' has left something to be desired with three defeats suffered in 14 outings.

Valencia host midtable Malaga on Sunday, meaning Real could at least spend 24 hours at the top.

Real would like to write off the Cup fiasco as just a small title gone begging as they target greater things - but Portuguese midfielder Luis Figo admitted that "it's a shame because it's another possible title gone begging."

Keeper Iker Casillas, who missed the Cup loss, voiced similar sentiments.

"We just have to put it be-

hind us and look to our next match," said the teenage star, who denied he was a transfer target for Barcelona and said he would be happy to stay at Real for the rest of his career.

Barcelona themselves head for Madrid - but only as far as the suburbs as they play modest Rayo Vallecano.

Rayo have performed miracles on a shoestring budget compared to their glitzy neighbours and are fourth in the table, ahead of Barca on goal difference. They also have the Primera Liga's most potent attack with 30 goals to date.

Deportivo La Coruna, meanwhile, are in action Saturday at Alaves, who sit in a respectable seventh spot at present.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Rayo Vallecano v Barcelona, Real Sociedad v Villarreal, Real Zaragoza v Las Palmas, Espanyol v Real Madrid, Alaves v Deportivo La Coruna

Sunday: Valladolid v Athletic Bilbao, Oviedo v Racing Santander, Celta Vigo v Real Mallorca, Osasuna v Numanzia, Valencia v Malaga

Bundesliga preview

Schalke hopes to stay atop



BERLIN, Dec 15: Schalke 04 are top of the German league at the halfway stage in the season for the first time since 1971 and will want to stay there over the one-month winter break, reports AFP.

This weekend's fixtures are the last before the league takes a break until January 26.

Schalke, who went first with a 2-0 win at lowly Unterhaching on Tuesday, must first travel on Saturday to Cologne, who have surprised most observers by occupying a respectable seventh place in the table in their first season after promotion.

Cologne have lost only one match this season at the Müngersdorfer Stadion on the banks of the Rhine.

Schalke, not one of Germany's glamour clubs but with a solid base of support in the industrial Ruhr area, are just two points clear of Bayer Leverkusen.

Schalke face being without Danish striker Ebbe Sand, who injured a shin last week against Stuttgart.

However, veteran midfielder Andreas Moller is over a back strain and is set to play.

Belgian striker Emile Mpenza may also return after

several weeks out with a calf problem.

Berti Vogts' team take on Wolfsburg away and will want to take full points after slipping up 3-2 at lowly Bochum on Wednesday.

Bayern Munich go into Christmas beginning to fire on all cylinders after a stuttering start to the year but have a tough tie against Hertha Berlin, leader of the championship earlier this month.

Goals from Brazilian Giovane Elber have dragged Bayern back into contention and left them comfortable in the Champions League.

Bayern will be without German international Carsten Jancker and French international Bixente Lizarazu and Willie Sagnol.

Their absence attests to the gruelling demands of continental and domestic football and Bayern's general manager

New Zealand pull out

WELLINGTON, Dec 15: New Zealand Friday formally withdrew from the Millennium Super Soccer Cup tournament in India in January, New Zealand Soccer (NZS) said in a statement, reports AFP.

Uli Hoeness is looking for reinforcements to add to the squad - and some of the current roster could be released.

"We must have three or four new people," he told Kicker magazine this week.

Pablo Thiam from Stuttgart will be joining, and others will follow, including Czech star Tomas Rosicky, who is on his way from Sparta Prague for an estimated 20 million marks (some 8.5 million dollars).

Borussia Dortmund, fourth and level on points with Bayern Munich, must travel to 12th-placed Hansa Rostock.

Bochum, boosted by their surprise win against Leverkusen, take on sixth-placed Kaiserslautern on Saturday.

Kaiserslautern have a trip to Slavia Prague in the UEFA Cup to look forward to, with the first leg on February 15.

FIXTURES

Friday (19:15 GMT): Unterhaching v Eintracht Frankfurt

Saturday (14:30 GMT): Bochum v Kaiserslautern, VfL Wolfsburg v Bayer Leverkusen, Stuttgart v Freiburg, Cologne v Schalke 04, Hansa Rostock v Borussia Dortmund, 1860 Munich v SV Hamburg (14:30 GMT)

Sunday (16:30 GMT): Hertha Berlin v Bayern Munich, Energie Cottbus v Werder Bremen