

Graham won't quit

LONDON, Jan 1 (Reuters/Internet): George Graham has been reported as saying he would not quit Tottenham Hotspur despite watching his team's worst performance of the season at Ipswich Town on Saturday.

The Spurs manager rejected speculation that he was negotiating a pay-off with the club's new owners ENIC.

I don't know what plans the new owners have for the club, he was quoted as saying by the Sunday Mirror.

I have not spoken to them yet.

But I know one thing, I want to stay the manager, and I want to be a successful one.

I've never been someone who gives up on a job halfway through. People can link whatever they want with my job but as far as I am concerned I am still Spurs manager and nothing is going to change.

Graham was angry with his players after the 3-0 defeat at Ipswich, a result that left Spurs with the worst away record in the English premier league - nine defeats in 11 games.

I can only apologise to the fans who travelled to watch us, he said.

Former Tottenham hero Glenn Hoddle, currently in charge at Southampton, has been linked with a return to White Hart Lane by the media.

Ex-Chelsea manager Gianluca Vialli has also entered the running, according to the Sunday Mirror.

Saint Etienne deny Toshack's leaving

PARIS, Jan 1: Saint Etienne on Saturday dismissed rumours that their Welsh coach John Toshack might be headed back to former club Real Sociedad, where he was twice previously in charge, reports AFP.

Toshack, under contract until the end of the season, has been trying to revive Saint Etienne's fortunes since his October arrival but they remain in the bottom six and face a long struggle against the drop.

L'Equipe cited Spanish media sources on Saturday as saying that former Real Madrid coach Toshack, who made his name as a player in the 1970s with Liverpool, would be ready to move back to San Sebastian-based Real Sociedad as he has retained a home in the Basque city.

But L'Equipe said the Welshman would not leave before his contract expires without the agreement of Alain Bompard, the Saint Etienne president.

And deputy president Gerard Soler said that would not be forthcoming.

He (Toshack) is with us until the end of the season and will have to meet up next Tuesday to run the rule over the squad," said Soler.

Should Toshack quit Les Verts, Saint Etienne could turn to Joel Muller, who was fired last week by Metz.

Saint Etienne are, meanwhile, having to rejig their squad as Spartak Moscow have announced the signing of their Ukrainian keeper Maxim Levytsky, although Soler said the deal had not gone through officially.

Brazilian Alex is still unsettled amid the unfolding passport scandal in French football which saw him temporarily become Portuguese, while midfielder Alain Masudi is set for a move to Lokomotiv Moscow.

Drulovic has jaw operation

LISBON, Jan 1: Porto's Yugoslav international Ljubinko Drulovic had an operation on Sunday after breaking his jaw and two teeth the day before in a Portuguese Cup match, club doctor Nelson Puga said, reports AFP.

Midfielder Drulovic had clashed with defender Nuno Abreu of Second Division side Felgueiras in the last 32 of the competition.

According to Puga, plastic surgeons fixed his jaw together and he will only be able to have liquid food for a month, though he is expected to undertake light training after just seven days.

Kashima complete treble

TOKYO, Jan 1: J-League champions Kashima Antlers stunned Shimizu S-Pulse with a golden goal to win the Emperor's Cup Monday 3-2 in Tokyo to win an unprecedented Japanese football treble, reports AFP.

Kashima, who also won the J-League Nabisco Cup, opened the scoring in the 42nd minute when Mitsuo Ogasawara scored from a free kick, but Shimizu equalised just before half-time through Argentine midfielder Fernando Nicolas Oliva.

Takayuki Suzuki scored Kashima's second goal in the 19th minute but Teruyoshi Ito equalised in the 81st minute.

The match ended a minute into extra time when Ogasawara volleyed in a 25-metre right-footed volley to secure the title for the Antlers.

Premiership preview

Season's wonders face off



LONDON, Jan 1: The surprise packages of the current English Premiership season Ipswich Town will be hoping to consolidate their third place position on Monday when they play their nearest rivals Sunderland, reports AFP.

Ipswich, who have gained the nickname of the 'Tractor Boys' during the current season as they hail from one of the most fertile farming areas in England, travel to Sunderland - known as the Black Cats - on the back of a comprehensive 3-0 win over struggling Spurs on Saturday.

Sunderland, though, can look forward to the match on the back of a fine 2-2 draw at second-placed Arsenal on Saturday in which they came from 2-0 down to gain a point.

While those two take top billing, runaway leaders Manchester United, who were fortunate to get a point at Newcastle on Saturday, host West Ham, who will be hoping to avoid anything near the 7-1 thrashing they endured at Old Trafford last season.

Arsenal, who against Sunderland looked a different side to the one that thrashed Leicester 6-1 last Tuesday, could travel to London rivals Charlton Athletic, fresh from a morale-boosting 4-1 away win over struggling Manchester City, without leading scorer and French footballer of the year Thierry Henry.

The forward suffered an ankle injury against Sunderland, Ipswich, who finally made it into the Premiership after failing in the play-offs for the past two years, will be looking to their strikeforce of Marcus Stewart and recent signing from Middlesbrough Alan Armstrong to see off Sunderland.

The 28-year-old Stewart, who was coveted by Premiership clubs when he was at Bristol Rovers but who instead moved to Huddersfield for two seasons, notched his 10th goal of the season against Spurs while 25-year-old Armstrong, whose time at Boro was marred by injury, scored his third goal for them against Spurs.

Ominous for Ipswich is the return to form of England striker Kevin Phillips, who has scored four times in the last two matches to take his total to 11, though his effective strike partner Republic of Ireland international Niall Quinn could be missing with a rib injury.

Manchester United coach Sir Alex Ferguson looks set to give England international midfielder Paul Scholes a place in the starting line-up against the Hammers after being used only as a substitute at the weekend.

because of a slight rib injury. West Ham, who had their match with Chelsea cancelled on Saturday because of the icy conditions, will travel to United with star winger Trevor Sinclair.

Chief among those hungry to show they are back in the race will be England striker Robbie Fowler, who looks set to partner Emile Heskey and swap places on the bench with fellow international striker Michael Owen.

The 25-year-old, scorer of 154 goals in 281 matches for Liverpool but only eight in his last 34, has been linked with a move to Chelsea and he failed on Sunday to dampen the rumours which claimed he wasn't happy under the regime of former French national coach Gerard Houllier.

"I want it known that I am happy at Liverpool at the minute," he said.

Liverpool will be doing well to take the three points against an in-form Southampton, whose squad mostly bought by former coach Dave Jones are playing superbly under Glenn Hoddle and in James Beattie have a striker whose current form few can match with 10 goals in his last 10 games.

Liverpool, for whom Houllier has come in for fierce criticism of late for greeceless comments and blaming his players rather than any tactical shortcomings on his behalf for the Boro defeat, can only hope that the Saints are unsettled by speculation that Hoddle is about to return to Spurs as coach in the place of current boss George Graham.

Hoddle's predecessor as England coach Terry Venables takes his vastly improved Middlesbrough side to the out of form Leeds United.

Despite outlaying a world record fee for a defender on Rio Ferdinand Leeds have only won once since he joined from West Ham and Robbie Keane - taken on loan from Inter Milan - has yet to find the net in two appearances.

The team that can beat AC Milan and Lazio in the Champions League but succumb to the less evident class of Newcastle and Aston Villa in their last two matches will have to pull up their Arsenal socks and put points on the board if they are not to be lured into a humiliating fight against relegation.

FIXTURES (k/o 1500 GMT unless stated - weather permitting):

Monday: Charlton v Arsenal, Chelsea v Aston Villa, Coventry v Man City, Derby v Everton, Leeds v Middlesbrough, Leicester v Bradford, Liverpool v Southampton, Man Utd v West Ham (2000 GMT), Sunderland v Ipswich

Tuesday: Tottenham v Newcastle (1945 GMT)

Supporters who had been inside the stadium believed it was filled beyond its 33,000 capacity and reporters at the game were almost unanimous in backing these claims. Globo television estimated the attendance at 40,000.

State governor Anthony Garotinho, who took the decision to call off the game and over-ruled soccer and police officials who wanted to carry on, criticised Vasco, saying they should have staged the game at the larger Maracana stadium.

But Vasco vice-president Enrico Miranda, a member of the Brazilian Congress, retorted: "It's very easy for him to sit there in his air-conditioned office and cancel the game."

Play was halted in the 21st minute after a fence behind one of the goals collapsed under the weight of hundreds of fans, who pushed forward to escape fighting further up in the terrace.

Officials at the Souza Aguiar hospital in central Rio de Janeiro, giving the final injury toll, said that around 100 people had required treatment. Two, including a five-year-old girl, are still detained though not critically hurt.

The match was only called off 90 minutes after the inci-

dent on the intervention of state governor Garotinho. Until then, Vasco's Miranda and police officials had said the game would go ahead but Sao Caetano said they wanted it called off.

Most commentators were outraged at the mere suggestion of the game finishing.

"This is absurd. People are discussing whether the game should start while a man is being carried passed them on a stretcher," said former international Walter Casagrande during a television commentary.

"There's no better summary for Brazilian football, which has always treated the supporters as if they were cattle and not people," said Juca Kfouri, an columnist in the sports daily Lance.

A decision is due on Tuesday on whether the match will be replayed but Sao Caetano officials have already announced that their players are on holiday as from Sunday.

The incident, in the season's showpiece match, capped a year in which Brazilian Congress have set up two commissions of inquiry to investigate alleged mismanagement, corruption and tax evasion in the administration of Brazilian soccer.

Maradona returning to Napoli?

BUENOS AIRES, Jan 1: Argentina's World Cup legend Diego Maradona could be rejoining his former team Napoli, his agent Guillermo Coppola told the Telam agency on Sunday, reports AFP.

The project would unite the former Argentine skipper with the southern Italian club where he shone as a player between 1984 and 1992.

Diego wants to do it and I am optimistic," said Coppola, though the post Maradona would hold was not immediately revealed. "We presented a plan and they (the directors of the Napoli) are studying it."

Club official Luca Ferlano, also president of Naples Marketing, said they were keen to have Maradona under contract.

During his eight years at Napoli, Diego Maradona won two league championships (1986/87 and 1989/90), an Italian Cup (1986/87), a UEFA Cup (1988/89) and an Italian Super Cup (1989/90).

He did not play in his final season under contract at Napoli as he was serving a 15-month ban for failing a drugs tests at the 1990 World Cup.

This year Maradona, who starred in Argentina's 1986 World Cup win, has been in the news in a battle with Pele for FIFA's player of the century award as well as a fight against drug-induced heart problems in January.

Ferrigno's New Year's sorry

ROME, Jan 1: An Italian Third Division player has sent a public New Year's apology to an opponent, Francesco Bertolotti, who slipped into a coma after a post-match punching incident, reports AFP.

"Dear Francesco, sooner or later we will meet again and we will embrace each other. I hope to see you on the pitch... I'm sorry, I never wanted to hit you," Como captain Massimiliano Ferrigno said in an open letter to the Resto del Carlino newspaper.

It is not yet clear whether 33-year-old Modena player Bertolotti will recover sufficiently to play again but doctors say he will be able to lead a normal life and initial fears that he might have suffered permanent brain damage have proved unfounded.

Bertolotti, speaking from a Parma hospital earlier this month, said he had been unable to forgive Ferrigno, who has been charged with grievous bodily harm and failing to assist a person in distress and is also facing a possible life ban from football.

It's been a strange and difficult year," said Sergi. "I hope we don't see another one like it for a long time."

Barca started 2000 as favourites for the Champions League, only to see arch-rivals Real Madrid go on to take the European Cup title for a record eighth time after beating Valen-

cia in an all-Spanish final.

They also missed out on the Spanish league to Deportivo Coruna and made a controversial exit from the King's Cup as the club decided they could not field a team for the semifinal second leg against Atletico Madrid because of injuries and international call-ups.

The summer brought the traumatic departure of Luis Figo to Real Madrid -- a loss the club has still not come to terms with -- as well as the departure of unpopular but experienced and successful coach Louis van Gaal.

Under van Gaal's replacement Llorenç Serra Ferrer, Barca crashed out of the Champions League at the first round stage for the third time in four years and they are currently fourth in the Spanish First Division, five points behind the leaders.

"It hasn't been a good year for me personally or for the club," said Sergi, who has played for much of the current season out of position as a midfielder.

"We haven't managed to win a single title all season."

"You can always take a positive look at it and say that playing for this club is a joy but when you don't win anything it's not so good."

Dutch full-back Reiziger, who has lost his place in the

'El Pais' football awards for 2000

Romario best of the Americas



MONTEVIDEO, Jan 1 (Reuters/Internet): Brazilian striker Romario was named as Player of the Year in the Americas on Sunday in a poll carried out by the Uruguayan daily El Pais.

The newspaper said the 34-year-old, who plays for Rio de Janeiro club Vasco da Gama, captured the prize by three votes from gifted Argentine midfielder Juan Roman Riquelme.

Colombian goalkeeper Oscar Corboda and Argentine striker Martin Palermo, Riquelme's team mates at Buenos Aires club Boca Juniors, were equal third.

The election, held among 242 journalists from around the Americas, is restricted to players based in the region. Romario, scorer of a club record 66 goals for Vasco this year, is the first Brazilian to win the title since Cafu in 1994.

The striker, who said he should have been included in the top three nomination for FIFA's Player of the Year award, is also leading scorer in the South American World Cup qualifying competition with seven goals, even though he has only played in two of Brazil's 10 matches.

Riquelme inspired Boca as they won a unique treble of Argentine Apertura Championship, South American Libertadores Cup and Intercontinental Cup this year.

Boca Juniors coach Carlos Bianchi and Alex Ferguson of Manchester United were voted the best of their respective continents.

It was the third time Bianchi had won the award after winning it at the helm of Velaz

Sarsfield in 1994 and with Boca Juniors in 1998.

European journalists voted Ferguson as the top coach of

his continent with 33 votes, ahead of Lazio's Sven Goran Eriksson, who polled 27 and Valencia's Hector Cuper on 16.

EL PAIS' FOOTBALL AWARDS FOR 2000

European team of the year (voted on by European journalists)

Fabien Barthez (Manchester United/Fra) - Lilian Thuram (Parma/Fra), Alessandro Nesta (Lazio/Ita), Jaap Stam (Manchester Utd/Ned), Roberto Carlos (Real Madrid/Bra) - David Beckham (Manchester Utd/Eng), Luis Figo (Real Madrid/Port), Zinedine Zidane (Juventus/Fra), Rivaldo (Barcelona/Bra) - Andrei Shevchenko (AC Milan/Ukr), Gabriel Batistuta (AS Roma/Arg)

European coach of the year

Sir Alex Ferguson (Manchester United) 33 votes, Sven-Goran Eriksson (Lazio) 27, Hector Cuper (Valencia) 16

European footballer of the year

Luis Figo (Real Madrid/Port) 45, Zinedine Zidane (Juventus/Fra) 40, Alessandro Nesta (Lazio/Ita) 30

South American coach of the year

Carlos Bianchi (Boca Juniors)

South American player of the year

Romario (Vasco da Gama/Bra)

ROMARIO

Sarsfield in 1994 and with Boca Juniors in 1998.

European journalists voted Ferguson as the top coach of

Barca backs glad its over



BARCELONA, Jan 1 (Reuters/Internet): Barcelona defenders Sergi and Michael Reiziger have both admitted they will be glad to see the back of 2000 at the Catalan club.

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side following the departure of his countryman van Gaal, gave an even more negative assessment of the last 12 months, taking in international as well as club disappointments.

"We lost the league, went out of the Champions League and I didn't win anything with the

club," said Sergi, who has played for much of the current season out of position as a midfielder.

"We haven't managed to win a single title all season."

"You can always take a positive look at it and say that playing for this club is a joy but when you don't win anything it's not so good."

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