

No Diego for Bilardo?

BUENOS AIRES, Jan 3: Diego Maradona's manager yesterday poured cold water on former national coach Carlos Bilardo's hopes that the player would join his 2003 presidential campaign, reports Reuters.

Bilardo, launching his Unity Party on Monday, said he wanted the immensely popular Maradona - who captained Argentina to victory in the 1986 World Cup - to join his new political team because of his way with people.

"At the moment (Maradona) needs to remain linked to the soccer world," Maradona's manager Guillermo Coppola told Radio Mitre. "He is a critic of politics not a political player... We will see what the future brings."

Maradona currently manages struggling Argentine first division side Almagro but spent much of last year in Cuba being treated for a life-threatening heart condition related to alcohol and drug abuse.

Denilson back in Spain

MADRID, Jan 3: One-time world's most expensive player Denilson returned to Spanish club Real Betis Tuesday after completing a loan spell with Brazilian giants Flamengo, reports AFP.

The Brazilian international, who moved from Sao Paulo to Betis for 28.2 million dollars at the start of the 1998/99 season, told journalists at Madrid airport: "I am here to help the team, win trophies and to have as few problems as possible."

"I'm in a calm mood although I know the problems an international player can have in Second Division football."

The 23-year-old was loaned out by Betis, relegated last season, to Flamengo last July after he scored just five goals in his two seasons there.

He was targeted by sections of Betis fans who believed he was not working hard enough despite having one of the highest salaries in the league.

Denilson said he was determined to help Betis back into the top flight. "I hope to be better than before. I left and help the team return to the First Division," he said.

Di Canio not going to Lazio

LONDON, Jan 3: Paolo Di Canio's agent insisted Tuesday that the West Ham striker has no intention of leaving Upton Park despite persistent reports linking him with a possible return to Lazio, reports AFP.

"Lazio assistant boss Roberto Mancini confirmed last week that Di Canio was the Serie A club's second-choice target behind Barcelona's Marc Overmars when the Italian transfer window opened Tuesday."

Di Canio was also reported to have admitted that returning to Lazio, where he played for four years between 1985 and 1989, would be "like a beautiful madness."

However, West Ham boss Harry Redknapp said the controversial 32-year-old striker was going nowhere despite the interest from England coach-elect Sven Goran Eriksson. "There's no chance of him moving at all," Redknapp said.

Di Canio's agent, Matteo Roggi confirmed that no contact with him had been made by Lazio, although the Serie A club apparently did make an unsuccessful move for the striker back in September.

Roggi told the Press Association: "There are just rumours going around and those are not useful for Paolo and for his club."

"He has a contract at West Ham until 2003 and he is very happy to stay there. I don't think that he wants to move anywhere else."

Di Canio not going to Lazio

LONDON, Jan 3: Paolo Di Canio's agent insisted Tuesday that the West Ham striker has no intention of leaving Upton Park despite persistent reports linking him with a possible return to Lazio, reports AFP.

"Lazio assistant boss Roberto Mancini confirmed last week that Di Canio was the Serie A club's second-choice target behind Barcelona's Marc Overmars when the Italian transfer window opened Tuesday."

Di Canio was also reported to have admitted that returning to Lazio, where he played for four years between 1985 and 1989, would be "like a beautiful madness."

However, West Ham boss Harry Redknapp said the controversial 32-year-old striker was going nowhere despite the interest from England coach-elect Sven Goran Eriksson. "There's no chance of him moving at all," Redknapp said.

Di Canio's agent, Matteo Roggi confirmed that no contact with him had been made by Lazio, although the Serie A club apparently did make an unsuccessful move for the striker back in September.

Roggi told the Press Association: "There are just rumours going around and those are not useful for Paolo and for his club."

"He has a contract at West Ham until 2003 and he is very happy to stay there. I don't think that he wants to move anywhere else."

Roggi told the Press Association: "There are just rumours going around and those are not useful for Paolo and for his club."

"He has a contract at West Ham until 2003 and he is very happy to stay there. I don't think that he wants to move anywhere else."

Karembeu, Desailly on PSG's mind

PARIS, Jan 3: French giants Paris Saint Germain are planning a raid on the English Premiership for World Cup winners Marcel Desailly and Christian Karembeu, a radio network reported here Tuesday, reports AFP.

The Sport OFM station said PSG boss Luis Fernandez had made Chelsea star Desailly and Middlesbrough's Karembeu his chief targets as part of a rebuilding programme.

Quoting sources close to the club, the report said Fernandez wanted to revive PSG's flagging fortunes by bringing in experienced players - with Desailly and Karembeu fitting the bill perfectly.

Spanish Cup Shock exit for Villarreal

GRENADA, Spain, Jan 3: First Division side Villarreal lost 4-2 on penalties after a 1-1 draw against Third Division Grenada on Tuesday to earn elimination from the Spanish Cup.

Villarreal, in eighth spot, opened the scoring through Argentina's Diego Cagna in the 77th minute but Nacho Sierra of Grenada equalized with a minute to go of full time. Extra time did not add to the score.



South Korean Kim Do Hoon (R) of the Japan/Korea All Stars team about to take a fall while World All Stars' Georgian Kakha Kaladeze goes for the ball during their exhibition match at Yokohama yesterday. --AFP photo

All-stars share honours

YOKOHAMA, Japan, Jan 3: The 2002 World Cup co-hosts Japan and South Korea joined forces Wednesday to hold out for a 1-1 draw against a World All-stars team at the Yokohama Stadium, reports AFP.

Korea's 1998 K-League most valuable player Ko Jong-Su scored for the World Cup hosts when his free kick from just outside of the area hit a defender and then landed in the net in the 17th minute.

But second-half All-stars substitute Robert Prosinecic of Croatia fired home an equalizer in the 72nd minute with a sizzling goal from outside the area.

"It was a match we should have won, said one of the host nations' coaches, former Argentinian star Osvaldo Ardiles.

"We had more chances to score. At half time, I told my players to score the second goal. But in the end, Prosinecic's fantastic goal made it even."

Paraguay's Jose Luis Chilavert, more famous worldwide than his country's president, repeatedly thrilled the sell-out crowd of 46,740 spectators with saves to keep his side in the game.

But the Japanese-Korean joint team made a series of scoring chances.

In the ninth minute, Choi Yong-Soo, last year's K-League most valuable player, was set free just in front of goal, only to see his shot career over the bar.

One minute later Choi again missed the spot after latching onto a Yutaka Akita pass in front of goal.

But it was a foul on the Korean which allowed Ko to hit his goal-scoring free kick in the 17th minute.

The All-stars had chances to equalize in the first half, both from Chulavert, who is famed for combining his goalkeeping duties with a penchant for taking free kicks.

But his shot from a 30th minute free kick hit a defender and one 13 minutes later went just wide.

Paraguay's Nelson Rafael Cuevas also shot just wide in the 43rd minute following work by Jorge Solano of Colombia and Nigeria's Tijjani Babangida.

In the 66th minute, Masashi Nakayama - Japan's only scorer in the World Cup finals, was set free in front of the goal mouth - only to see his header narrowly miss the target.

Norway ban top names

OSLO, Jan 3 (Reuters/Internet): Norway's Football Association barred three English Premier League players, including Manchester United striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, from the national team on Tuesday after they refused to sign a sponsorship accord.

If the decision stands, Norway will be without Solskjaer, Manchester United defender Ronny Johnsen and Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Steffen Iversen for their next World Cup qualifier against Poland in March.

"We are both surprised and disappointed that some of the players won't be with us in future," Football Association president Per Ravn Omdal said after the trio refused a four-year deal aimed at raising cash for soccer in Norway.

Ravn said the association had told all players last month that only those who signed by the end of 2000 would be eligible for the national team, Omdal said, however, that the players could still change their minds and sign.

He told a news conference that two other players - strikers Tore Andre Flo of Glasgow Rangers and Erik Bakke of Leeds - had not yet said whether they would sign or not. The five are among the highest paid of Norway's soccer players.

Iversen said he hoped to reach an accord and said the association were making a misguided attempt to put pressure on the players. "It's very important for me to play for the national team," he said.

The new sponsorship deal runs for four years from January 1. The Norwegian daily Dagbladet said it was worth 400 million Norwegian crowns (45.37 million dollars) for the association, with players keeping 15 million of the total.

Under the deal, each player is obliged to work for two of the 12 team sponsors for one day each year until 2004. Sponsors in the past have included an airline and a supermarket.

Omdal said that the deal benefited the players and the Football Association, which uses the cash for improving the game in Norway and developing other players.

But players including Solskjaer have said in the past that they should have more say over the use of their names in advertising.

National team coach Nils Johan Semb said he hoped the three would reach a deal with the association. "I hope this doesn't stand," he said.

Norway trail Poland, Belarus and Ukraine in European group five in qualifying for the 2002 World Cup and are ahead of Wales and Armenia. Norway qualified for the World Cup finals in 1994 and 1998.

Fergie wants challenge

LONDON, Jan 3: Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson believes some fashionable clubs will be challenging for top honours in the Premiership come the end of the season, reports AFP.

The Red Devils are sitting pretty 11 points clear at the top of the table, and the second half of the season appears to be developing into a light over scraps.

While Ferguson will point out to his players that United enjoyed a 12-point lead over Arsenal three years ago and were eventually piped to the title by the Double-winning Gunners, his side's current form is so awesome that a repeat performance is virtually impossible to contemplate.

In his half-term report on the Premiership, Ferguson said, "Arsenal, because of the experience they have got, will be a challenger."

"Sunderland's results have been impressive, and when you couple Sunderland with the support base they have got they can have a big drive that will keep them going - rather like Leeds last season."

"When you're winning games the confidence is high and I think they could continue to challenge."

"Liverpool are a big, strong athletic team and they will keep going. Ipswich keep surprising

everyone but I think they will be happy to be in the top six and I don't see anyone else. It is difficult to come from behind what people say about it being a bad league - it's not a bad league. We've had some frights this year and have lost two-goal leads three times. So it's not that bad a league."

Ferguson is wary of complacency creeping in. He said: "It's a danger. It's an unhealthy position for us to be in - in a way."

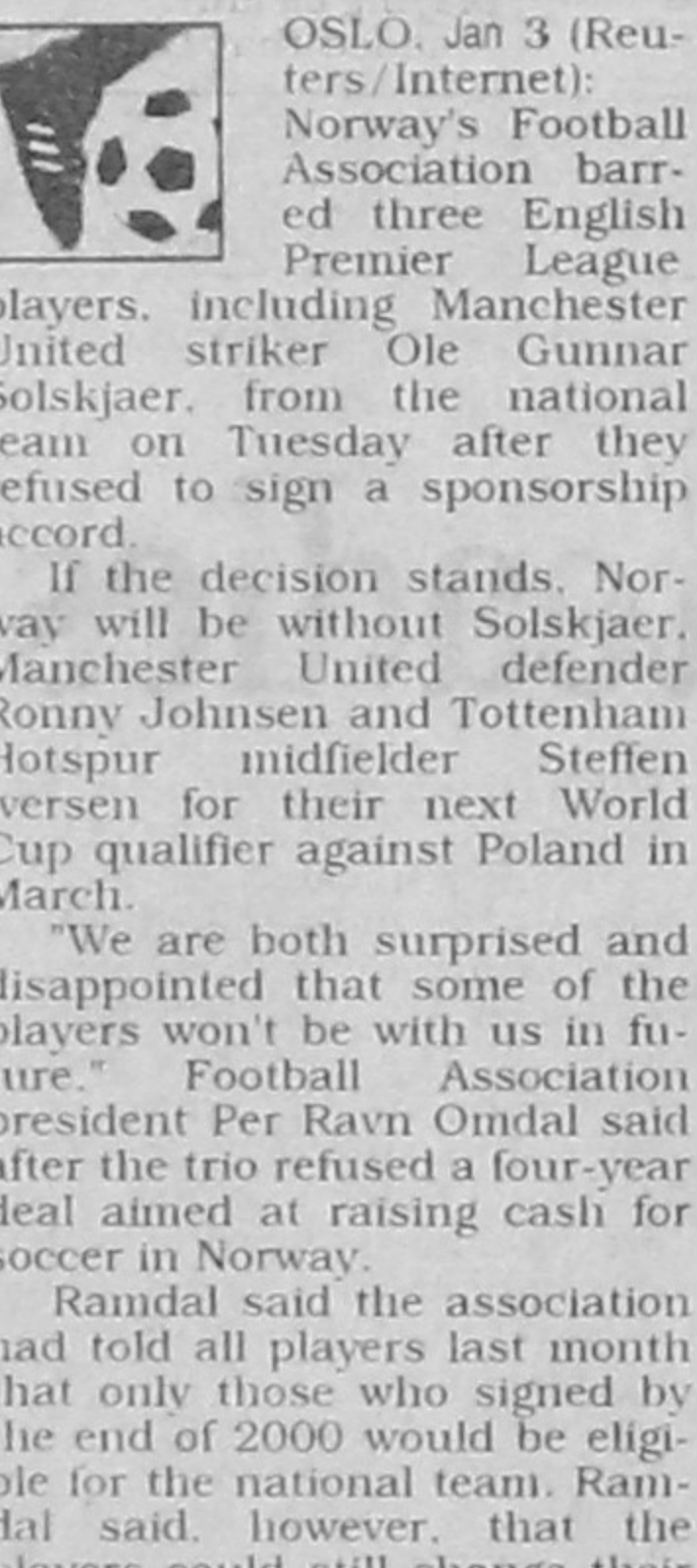
"I'm expecting the players to focus on every game and we're going to put our foot down and try our best in every match."

"It's a dangerous situation that we are in, because all the talk is going to be that the league is over and that sort of thing."

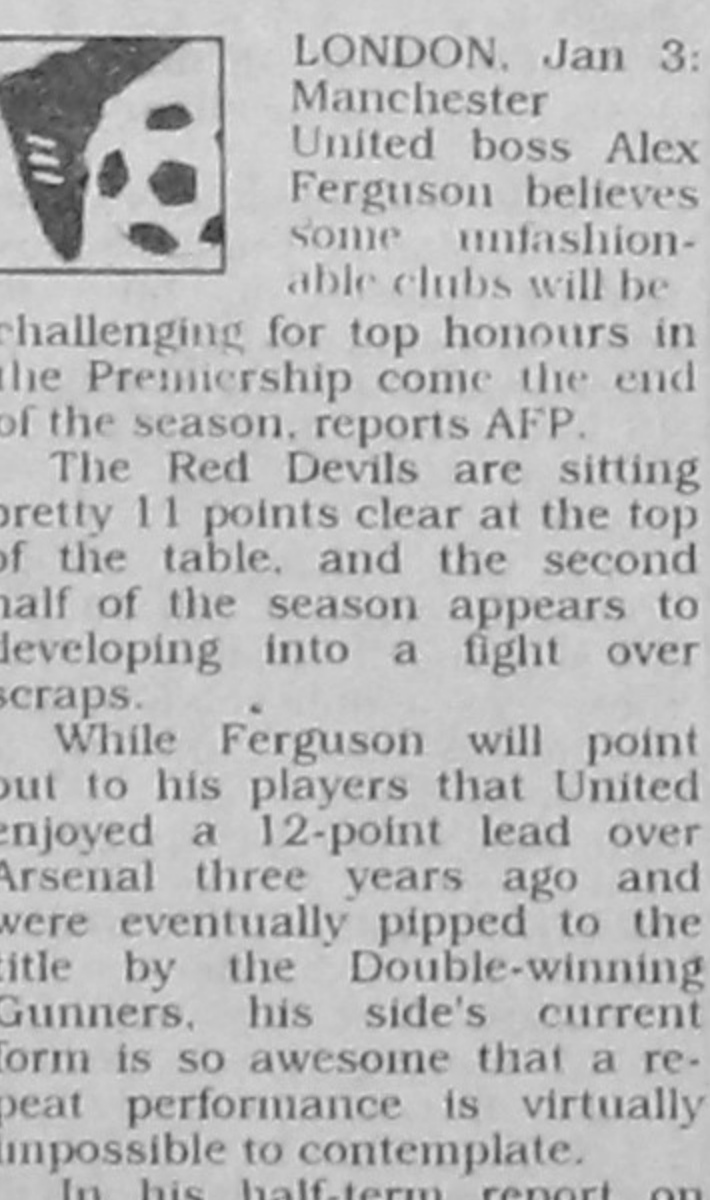
"That could lead to complacency with a lot of people but I wouldn't like to think that would happen with our lads. They're professional enough to know, and have had the experience of throwing the league away three years ago when Arsenal caught us."

West Ham boss Harry Redknapp, whose team were put to the sword in a 3-1 defeat at Old Trafford on Monday night, believes United are one of the best sides he has ever seen in English football.

He said: "They are an absolutely fantastic team - they're a different class and are way in front of anyone else in this country."



OLE GUNNER SOLSKJAER



SIR ALEX FERGUSON

Blanc threatens to leave club

MILAN, Jan 3: Inter Milan's French World Cup and Euro 2000 winning defender Laurent Blanc said on Wednesday he would leave the underachieving Italian First Division side in the summer unless they transform themselves into credible contenders to win trophies, reports AFP.

The 35-year-old, whose contract expires in June, told Gazzetta dello Sport he will decide in the coming weeks whether to stay put or seek a new challenge in France according to how Inter perform after the season resumes at the weekend.

"I am a realist and I have two possibilities," said the veteran defender. "To continue playing in Italy, presumably at Inter or return to France and end my career there."

"My contract expires in June and it will be my decision alone. We will see what happens in the next few weeks - I still need to reflect a little bit."

The defender also made it clear that he felt the tendency of the Italian First Division club to constantly chop and change its personnel was a detrimental factor when it came to building team spirit.

"The cornerstone of our success in the (French) national team has been team spirit which came from the bleakest period," said Blanc.

"After 1994 (when France failed to qualify for the World Cup) the atmosphere was awful but it was in this context that was forged the strong group of players whose results everybody knows."

"To succeed we need to know each other well and this is very difficult at Inter where every year they change players all the time."

Blanc, who has said he wants to continue for at least one more season, has been linked with the role of general manager at another ailing European giant French First Division club Marseille, whom he joined Inter from.

Inter about to rope in Uruguayan

MILAN, Jan 3: Penarol's Uruguayan forward Antonio Pacheco was on Wednesday expecting to put the final touches to the transfer deal that will take him to struggling Italian First Division giants Inter Milan, reports AFP.

Pacheco arrived at Milan's Malpensa airport on Tuesday evening and was expected to conclude a deal with Inter although he will not be formally registered to the club's jersey until after the weekend derby match with AC Milan.

The striker, on the instructions of Inter, did not speak to journalists on arrival in Italy but was more forthcoming before boarding the flight in Montevideo.

"I want to get to the World Cup finals with Uruguay," said the 24-year-old who likes to play a creative supporting role behind a frontman.

"Now I want to do something great with Inter."

Pacheco was accompanied by Daniel Delgado, the right-hand man of Uruguayan manager Paco Casal who handles the affairs of many leading Uruguayan players, including Alvaro Recoba, who is already on the books at Inter.

The player and Casal reached an informal agreement with Inter transfer supremo Ruiidlo Ghelfi before Christmas.

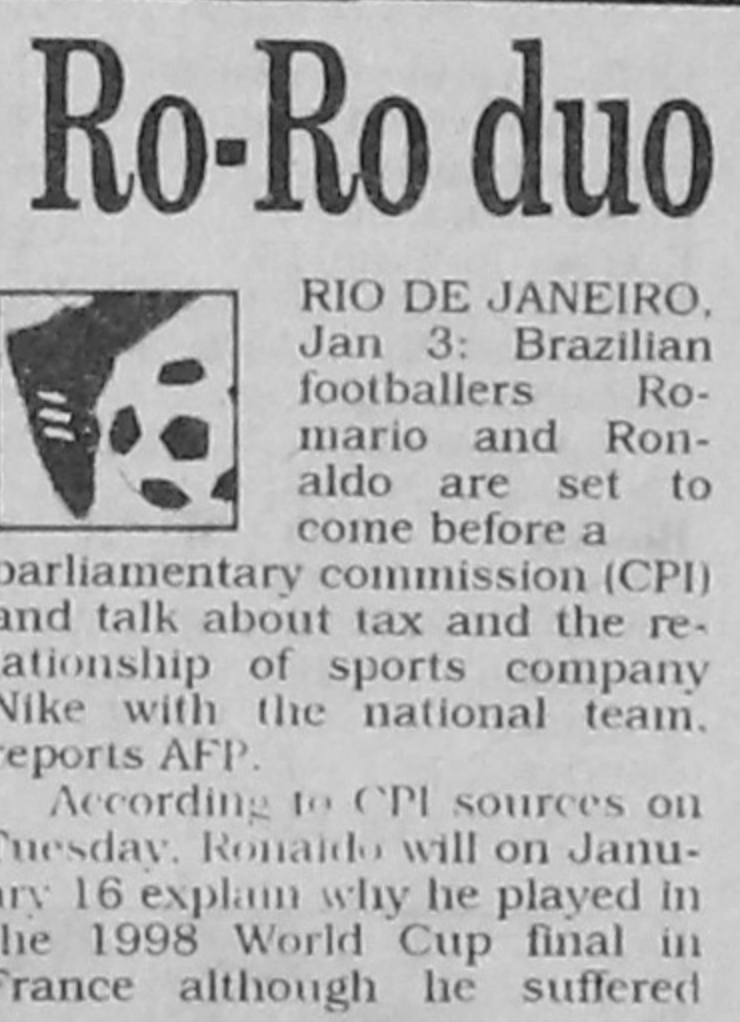
Ro-Ro duo to face CPI

RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 3: Brazilian footballers Romario and Ronaldo are set to come before a parliamentary commission (CPI) and talk about tax and the relationship of sports company Nike with the national team, reports AFP.

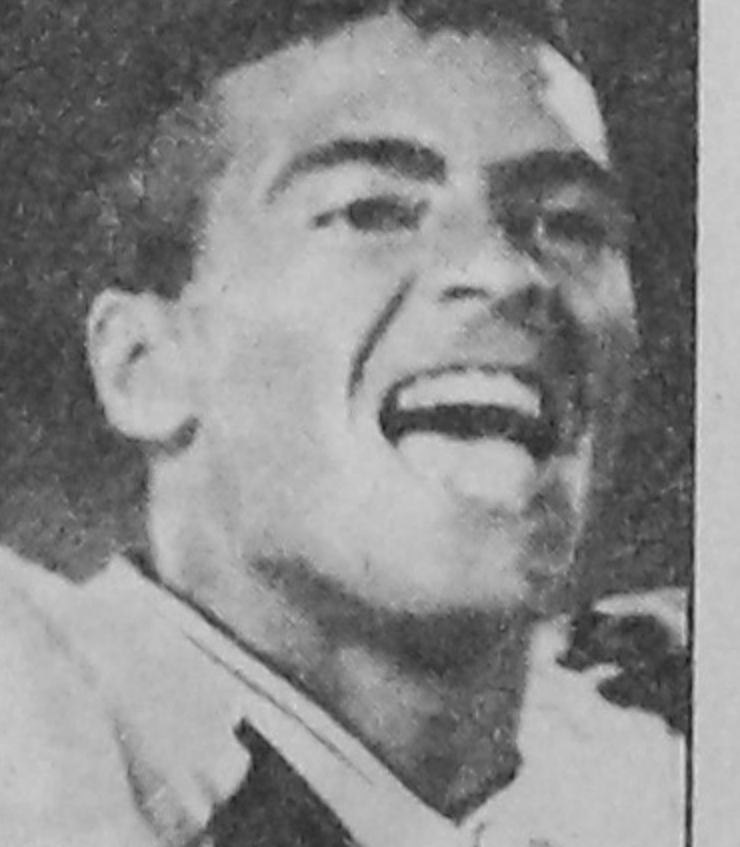
According to CPI sources on Tuesday, Ronaldo will on January 16 explain why he played in the 1998 World Cup final in France although he suffered friendly internationals, with a minimum of three per year, in which at least eight players of the first-choice side must play.

Romario, Brazil's star player in the 1994 World Cup win, is set to come before the CPI on January 18. The Vasco Da Gama striker is suspected of not paying taxes while playing at Barcelona. He is believed to have transferred money back to Brazil but did not declare it to the fiscal authorities.

Other players yet to come before the CPI include 1994



ROMARIO

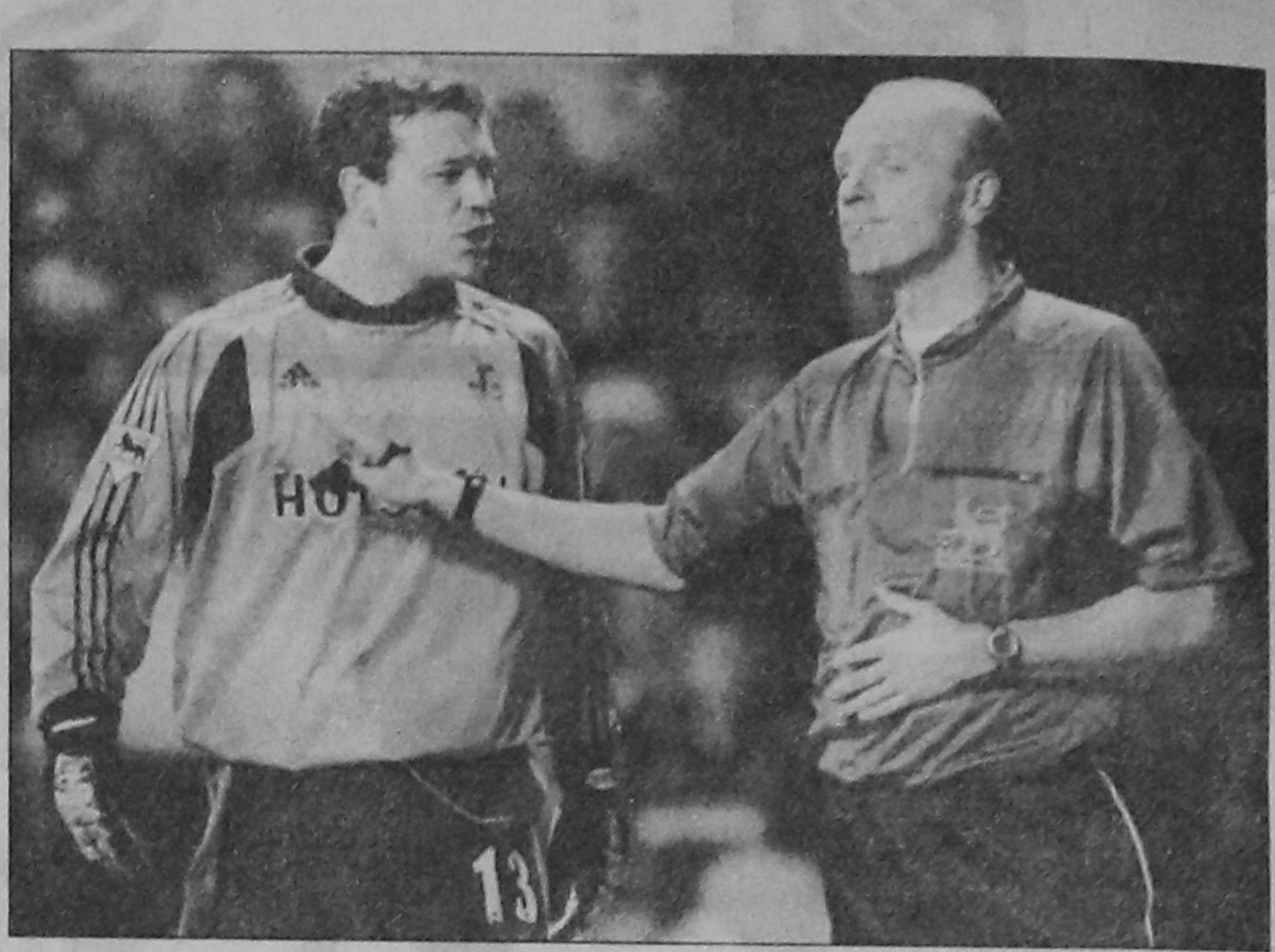


RONALDO

World Cup winning captain Dunga, Caesar Sampaio and Real Madrid freekick specialist Roberto Carlos.

The CPI has already spoken to former Brazil coach Mario Zagallo, ex-FIFA president Joao Havelange, team doctors and other Brazilian internationals.

The CPI also wants to investigate the sale of Brazilian players to foreign clubs and the falsification of passports for young players who left the country.



Neil Sullivan (L), the Tottenham Hotspurs custodian, gives his side of the story to referee Bennett after being sent off for a foul against Newcastle United's Kieron Dyer during their hot-tempered Premiership encounter at White Hart Lane on January 2. --Internet photo

Premiership Spurs shoot Magpies down

LONDON, Jan 3: Tottenham beat Newcastle 4-2 in the English Premiership on Tuesday where three sendings off marred this final fixture of the holiday programme at White Hart Lane, reports AFP.

The result ended a dreadful run for George Graham's men which had seen them collect just three points from a possible 18, not winning in six Premiership attempts and preserved Tottenham's unbeaten league record at home this season.

Newcastle saw Nolberto Solano (deliberate handball) and Kieron Dyer (foul and abusive language) both get their marching orders while Tottenham goalkeeper Neil Sullivan saved red for a professional foul.

A storming eight first-half minutes - after they had fallen behind - provided Tottenham with a 3-1 lead.

Nolberto Solano had put the visitors ahead but the Peruvian was later dismissed for handling on the line as Spurs overturned the deficit in splendid style.

Gary Doherty levelled, Darren Anderton put Spurs ahead from the spot - he then missed a second spot-kick - and leading scorer Sergei Rebrov completed the first-half scoring with a sublime third.

But Newcastle's early supremacy was rewarded with a 23rd-minute opener, created by Daniel Ameobi and clinically finished by Solano.

The youngster stole the ball off Sol Campbell's toe and barged his way past Tim Sherwood to tee up the overlapping Peruvian, who stole down the left and calmly slotted the ball past a helpless Neil Sullivan.

The lead was shortlived, however, as Tottenham turned the match on its head in sensational style.

Stephen Clemence found Doherty's head from a right-wing corner and Newcastle keeper Steve Harper was given no chance with a thunderous effort from 12 yards.

The leveller was only for starters though, as Tottenham added two more in the next eight minutes as Newcastle were reduced to 10 men.

First, Gary Speed was adjudged to have pushed over Anderton in the area and the latter got up to slam the penalty past Harper.

And the hosts were handed another spot-kick in the 32nd minute as Solano kept out a Doherty header on the line with his hand and received his marching orders.

This time Harper blocked Anderton's driven effort with his legs.

But the White Hart Lane faithful need not have fretted as a sublime goal from Rebrov made it 3-1.

Doherty burst forward and slipped the striker into space in the box, the recalled hitman looked up and clipped a delicious chip with the outside of his right foot across Harper from 12 yards and in off the far post.

Dyer was the major protagonist in the second-half, creating an opening, pulling a goal back and receiving his marching orders within eight second-half minutes.

The England midfielder charged more than half the length of the field following a 46th-minute corner for the home side, outpaced Oyvind Leonhardsen into the area and fell under the challenge of Sullivan.

The Scotland keeper protested his innocence to no avail, received the red card from Bennett and Dyer sent substitute keeper Ian Walker the wrong way from the spot.

But it was soon 10 against nine as Dyer's heated opinions, expressed to a linesman after being felled in the box, resulted in his exit.

The nine men of Newcastle huffed and puffed but the win was knocked out of them 13 minutes from the end as Les Ferdinand scored from Anderton's free-kick.

Premiership: MU & the rest

LONDON, Jan 3 (Reuters): The English Premier League season still has four months to go but the question fans are asking is who will finish second to Manchester United.

United's dominance of the English game is so great that Manchester bookmaker Fred Done is already paying out to punters who tipped them for the greatest English sides ever - Aston Villa of the 1890s, Arsenal of the 1930s and Liverpool of the 1970s and 1980s.

Ferguson is predictably playing down the praise, knowing all too well that teams have squandered big leads before.

In January 1996, Newcastle were 12 points clear of the field but finished second to Manchester United who won the title by four points.

In February 1998, United led by 12 points with only 10 matches to play and ended up second to Arsenal who piped them to the title by a point.

But United are unlikely to falter this time. As journalist David Lacey said in Monday's Guardian: "Sir Alex Ferguson's third team would probably be quite capable of beating Fulham in the FA Cup next Saturday."

All of which leaves the other 19 clubs in the division battling for either a Champions League or UEFA Cup place, the FA or League Cup or just to stay up.

While Arsenal have been United's closest challengers for much of the last five years their erratic form has left them down as far as the title race is concerned.

Squandering a 2-0 home lead over Sunderland at High-bury on Saturday in a match which ended 2-2 and losing 1-0 at Charlton on New Year's Day summed up the inconsistency of Arsenal's season.

Sunderland start the New Year in third place after seven wins in their last nine matches, while promoted Ipswich have been the revelation of the season.

Widely tipped to go straight back down after winning the playoffs last season, Ipswich are fourth with a real hope of bringing back European soccer to Portman Road for the first time since 1982-83.

The top six are rounded out by Liverpool and Leicester. Like Arsenal, Liverpool have been erratic, scoring excellent wins last month over Manchester United and Arsenal before losing to lowly Middlesbrough.

Leicester, like Ipswich, have performed way beyond expectations with caretaker England coach Peter Taylor counting much of the goal work started by his predecessor Martin O'Neill. But their limitations were highlighted at Highbury on December 26 when they crashed 6-1 to Arsenal.

The worry for the rest of the league is that they could win the title for at least another three seasons after this.

Ireland manager Mick McCarthy described their midfielder Roy Keane, David Beckham, Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs as perfect on Monday, while The Guardian newspaper compared them with some of