

Magpies' Ameobi interests Nigeria

LAGOS, Jan 21: Nigeria coach Jo Bonfrere is planning to have Newcastle United striker Shola Ameobi watched as he attempts to guide the Super Eagles to their third successive World Cup finals...

Ameobi scored his first goal in the English Premiership last week in his team's 3-1 victory over Coventry City.

His goalscoring exploits have attracted a mass of publicity here - prompting speculation Bonfrere may be ready to draft the 19-year-old into the international reckoning.

"I hope to have a look at him before calling him up," Bonfrere told AFP here.

The youngster, who was born of a Nigerian father, was only recently given a contract by manager Bobby Robson after breaking into the first team squad.

The Dutch coach has already invited another teenager, Bina Ajawa, for the crucial World Cup tie against Sudan in the southeastern city of Port Harcourt next Saturday.

Dele Adebola of Birmingham City and Ade Akinbiyi from Leicester City are two other England-based players who have interested Bonfrere recently.

Akinbiyi trained with the squad prior to the 2000 African Nations Cup but left shortly afterwards as a result of injury while Adebola is yet to honour an invitation by the Super Eagles.

Viduka best of Oceania

SYDNEY, Jan 21: Australian World Cup striker Mark Viduka was Sunday announced as the 2000 Oceania Footballer of the Year, reports AFP.

Viduka beat his Leeds United Australian teammate Harry Kewell for the award, voted by media throughout the South Pacific region.

Viduka, 24, marked his first season with Leeds since transferring from Glasgow Celtic by becoming the leading scorer in the English Premier League by the end of the year.

While at Celtic Viduka last season won the Scottish Player of the Year Award.

Viduka polled 118 votes against Kewell's 104, with New Zealand's Los Angeles-based Simon Elliott and Richard Iwai of Vanuatu joint third on 27.

Among others to poll votes in the 2000 Oceania poll were European-based Australians Brett Emerton, Danny Tiatto, Tony Vidmar and Paul Okon and New Caledonia's Christian Karembou.

Ronaldinho would have stayed if...

RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 21: Gremio's Brazilian international Ronaldinho Gaucho said Saturday he would have loved to stay with the club rather than move to Paris Saint Germain had he received a decent offer, reports AFP.



RONALDINHO

Ronaldinho, just 20 and one of Brazil's great hopes for the 2002 World Cup, said he had finally decided on a move to PSG as he felt the Brazilian club had not appeared sufficiently interested in holding onto him.

"I will always love Gremio. I would play for the team for nothing but I can't stay if I am not valued," said the forward.

"I have been at the club for years, and I can't wait around for ever. I can't live from love (for the club) alone," he explained.

Ronaldinho said he had been waiting for a new contract offer for almost two years but in vain.

"I was here for the past two years in love with Gremio without the club making me a proposal. If they had made one a year ago things would have been much easier.

"Gremio hung around too long and my family and I struck a deal with Paris Saint Germain."

Ronaldinho said he was disappointed that Gremio had only offered him a two-year contract extension worth around 14 million dollars when it was too late.

Meanwhile a Gremio official said that the club would try to overturn his transfer to PSG with an appeal to world football body FIFA.

The official, Homero Bellini, said that article 13 of FIFA's statutes say the buying club has to make known to the selling side the existence of a pre-contractual agreement, which he insists was not the case with Ronaldinho, who as he is out of contract next month can move to France for nothing.



Patrick Kluyvert (L), the Barcelona striker watches Valencia defender Fabian Ayala clearing the ball during their Primera Liga fixture at Valencia on January 20. - AFP photo

Primera Liga

Barca pass Valencia test

MADRID, Jan 21: A piledriver after just six minutes from Dutch star Frank De Boer propelled Barcelona back into the Spanish title race on Saturday as it brought a 1-0 win at championship rivals Valencia, reports AFP.

The loss was Valencia's first in the Liga at home this season. Barca leapfrogged Saturday's opponents and are now within two points of eternal rivals Real Madrid, who visit Valladolid on Sunday, reports AFP.

Real have 38 points to

Barca's 36 but also have two games in hand on the Catalan club while Valencia have slid a further point behind.

De Boer's ambitious left foot effort all but silenced the home crowd at the Estadio Mestalla, which had hoped to see a repeat of last May's 4-1 drubbing of their near neighbours in their Champions League semi-final first leg.

Thereafter the match turned ugly with a plethora of crude fouls and Barca had Luis Enrique sent off just moments before the break by referee Lopez Nieto, who was also conspicuous for wearing a sponsored

shirt - the first referee to do so in the Primera Liga.

Valencia's title bid is slipping away as they went down last week at Deportivo La Coruna.

Barca, on the other hand, are right back in the thick of things and Patrick Kluyvert might have doubled their advantage when he forced a great save out of home keeper Santiago Canizares early in the second half before Josep Guardiola lit the bar with a free kick.

Valencia's frustration told as Italian defender Amedeo Carboni received his marching orders on 52 minutes.



An AFP file photo of England and Arsenal defender Tony Adams who announced yesterday that he would quit international football.

Adam bids internationals bye

LONDON, Jan 21: Arsenal's veteran England defender Tony Adams has revealed he is quitting international football in order to prolong his career with the Gunners, reports AFP.

The Gunners defender believes at the age of 34 he owes it to his club not to add further strain to his injury-prone body by continuing his England career, meaning new England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson will have to turn to up-and-comers such as Leeds' Rio Ferdinand sooner than he might have liked.

Adams, who captained England against Germany in the last international at Wembley which brought the curtain down on the Kevin Keegan reign, said: "I have taken the decision to listen to my body. Something has to give and it has to be the internationals.

"I want to give the benefit of the time I have left in the game to Arsenal. I can't keep being cruel to them by playing for England then missing club games. It's not fair on them because they have been very good to me," he told The Observer.

"Even though neither Arsene Wenger nor anyone else at Arsenal has said anything to me, I

feel obligated towards them. I owe them some games.

"I believe we can achieve something big over the next season or two and I want to play a full part in that. It will help if I can rest in international weeks."

Adams, who agreed a new contract with Arsenal last week,

has seen his appearances for both club and country restricted over the last few years due to a series of injuries.

Adams made his England debut aged 20 in a 4-2 win against Spain in Madrid in 1987 and has won 66 caps, 13 of them as captain, scoring five goals.

ADAMS FACTFILE

1996: Overcomes knee injury to figure in all five of England's Euro 96 matches in a campaign which again ends in a semi-final defeat on penalties to Germany. Reports that Adams is seeking a divorce after his wife Jane is treated for drug addiction are followed by his own admission of alcoholism.

1997: Hit by injury to left ankle in March and then rib injury which keeps him out for the start of the season.

1998: Played a fundamental part in the side that drew 0-0 with Italy in the Olympic stadium to qualify for France 98.

1998: Wins his 50th cap for England but suffers huge disappointment when England lose to Argentina on penalties.

Helps lead Arsenal to the league and FA Cup double.

1999: Is an integral part of the England team that qualifies for Euro 2000.

2000: Suffers disappointment when Arsenal lose to Galatasaray in the UEFA Cup final. Is called up to Kevin Keegan's Euro 2000 squad.

August 24: Named as England captain following Alan Shearer's decision to retire from the international scene.

October 7: Skippers England against Germany in opening World Cup qualifier - the last England international at Wembley before its redevelopment. England lose 1-0 and Keegan quits as coach after the game.

October 11: Adams misses the World Cup qualifier in Finland because of a recurrence of back trouble and Martin Keown takes over as captain for the 0-0 draw. Howard Wilkinson acts as caretaker England manager for the game.

2001: January 20: Adams announces that he intends to quit international football in order to prolong his playing career.

Figo's advice for Beckham

MADRID, Jan 21 (Reuters/Internet): Manchester United's David Beckham should seriously consider moving to Spain to further his career, Luis Figo said on Thursday.

"I know that Beckham has reached the top in England and that Manchester is a great club, but there are also questions of personal ambition and desire to be considered," the European player-of-the-year told reporters.

"I was playing well at Sporting Lisbon, but since I have come to Spain I have improved as a player.

"I know that Beckham would be a great success in Spain."

Figo joined European Champions Real Madrid from bitter rivals Barcelona for a world record \$6.1 million US dollars in July last year after leading Portugal to the Euro 2000 semi-finals where they were narrowly beaten by France.

The 28-year-old forward said he was a big fan of the England captain, whose contract with premier league champions United runs out in 18 months.

"He is a great player and one I really admire. He is one of the best crossers of the ball I have ever seen in my life and he is good enough to play in any of the world's best clubs," Figo said.

Beckham, 25, said last week he had not yet started contract talks with United but wanted to stay at the club.

French Cup

No miracles this time for Calais

PARIS, Jan 21: After last year's exploits, when they became the first Fourth Division side to reach the final, Calais saw their hopes of another fairytale run end in tears Saturday as they bowed out 3-1 to First Division title-chasers Sedan, reports AFP.

There was a shock elsewhere as reigning league champions Monaco crashed 1-0 at Third Division Valenciennes while Paris Saint Germain needed extra time to oust another Third Division side in Thourou with ex-Everton veteran Mickael Madar twice on target.

"I hadn't played for seven months so to get a goal would have been great - but two! I must thank coach Luis Fernandez for having faith in me," said Madar afterwards.

As PSG celebrated advancing to the last 32 Monaco had a nightmare as keeper Stephane Porato was red-carded after just 16 minutes at the Georges Pompidou stadium for hauling down the advancing Zouaoui.

Valence striker Guei bagged what proved to be the winner after 41 minutes of a match which was turbulent to say the least with nine yellow cards dished out.

Another top flight side bowing out were Lens, beaten 5-3 on penalties after 120 minutes left them locked at 2-2 at home versus fellow First Division side Troyes.

There were no problems whatsoever for holders Nantes, who slaughtered Third Division Pacy-sur-Eure 9-0 with Romanian star Viorel Moldovan hitting four of the goals.

Saint Etienne, who face relegation after being docked seven league points last week for their role in the false passport scandal, came from 2-1 down to win 3-2 in extra time at Ajaccio of the Third Division.

Grobbelaar pleads innocence

LONDON, Jan 21: Disgraced former Liverpool goalkeeper Bruce Grobbelaar insisted he was innocent of match-fixing allegations here Sunday and said he did not fear a possible worldwide ban, reports AFP.

Speaking in the wake of an appeal court ruling last Thursday which effectively branded him corrupt, the 43-year-old Zimbabwean vowed to fully assist any fresh investigations launched into match-rigging.

Insisting he was innocent of the appeal court's allegations, Grobbelaar pointed out he had been formally acquitted during a criminal court case four years ago.

"This is an overthrow of a libel action, not a criminal trial, and I was found not guilty in a criminal trial," said Grobbelaar, who was acquitted at Winchester Crown Court in 1997.

"I've been through the mill with an FA inquiry and I've cooperated with the FA inquiry and got a fine from the FA, and if they want to enquire further I will assist them totally."

Grobbelaar, said last week's court ruling had left him "flabbergasted and devastated."

"How many times do you want me to carry on saying I didn't do anything? Do you think that one day I am going to turn round and admit that I did it?" he told BBC Radio Five Live.

The former keeper insisted the balance of evidence still pointed to his innocence after those initial trials in 1997 both failed to prove his guilt.

"I was acquitted in the second criminal trial and awarded costs. There were 12 jurors at the libel trial and yet three people can overturn this decision."

"These are three people who may be good at their job but they have never been to a football match or any of the criminal trials."

"They've got their own opinion but I would say they are talking pie in the sky."

And Grobbelaar once again insisted it was virtually impossible for one man to influence a result.



Andy Cole (R), the Manchester United forward, speeding away from Aston Villa's Steve Stone during their Premiership game at Old Trafford on January 20. - AFP photo

Premiership

No point trying to stop MU

LONDON, Jan 21: Manchester United are quoted at odds of 100/1 on to win the Premiership - the shortest odds for a football team ever after beating Aston Villa 2-0 on Saturday to race 14 points clear of the chasing pack, reports AFP.

Bookmakers William Hill also quote Arsenal at 22/1, Liverpool at 33/1 and second-placed Sunderland 150/1.

Spokesman Graham Sharpe said: "To have just one pound you would have to stake one hundred pounds, which means that to all realistic intents and purposes they are stone-cold certainties."

A rare goal by England defender Gary Neville put the runaway Premiership leaders on their way to victory at Old Trafford.

Neville flicked home Roy Keane's inswinging free-kick to give the reigning champions the lead after 57 minutes and Teddy Sheringham slotted the second from close range three minutes from time for his 18th goal of the season.

Villa, who fielded new 9.5 million pound (14 million dollar) record signing Juan Pablo Angel, dominated the second half but failed to find the United net, with France goalkeeper Fabien Bartlitz in fine form.

New England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson's hopes of watching David Beckham were dashed before kick-off when the England skipper was rested.

United, who have 56 points from 24 games, stretched their lead at the top of the table to 14 points although second-placed Sunderland can reduce the gap should they beat bottom club Bradford at the Stadium of Light on Sunday.

Twenty-two year-old Brazilian star Edu, signed for 6 million pounds (8.8 million dollars) from Corinthians, came on as a second half substitute for Arsenal in their 0-0 draw at Leices-

ter. Leicester, who fielded former Lazio striker Roberto Mancini, played most of the match with 10 men after Matthew Jones was sent off six minutes from half time.

Arsenal, chasing a Champions League place for next season, remain third in the Premiership, 15 points behind United.

Middlesbrough extended their unbeaten run under former England coach Terry Venables with a 0-0 draw against Liverpool at Anfield.

Afterwards Liverpool boss admitted his England striker Michael Owen, who missed several good chances, was suffering from a crisis in confidence.

"It is more a matter of confidence for Michael. He missed chance at Crystal Palace and now it's happened here. He is not totally right and he is getting frustrated."

"We are working on Michael's problems and trying to get him back to his best level. He needs to get himself right and over a succession of niggling injuries."

Robbie Keane banged in the fastest goal of the day, netting inside two minutes to put Leeds in front against Newcastle but the visitors fought back to win 3-1 at Elland Road.

Two minutes later Danny Mills handled in the penalty area and Peruvian Nolberto Solano levelled from the spot.

Newcastle went in front a minute before the break when Chilean Clarence Acuna held off Olivier Dacourt to score and Shola Ameobi wrapped up the points three minutes from time to send his club up to sixth.

Chelsea came back from being a goal behind to thump Ipswich 4-1 at Stamford Bridge. Ipswich's Marcus Stewart, the Premiership's leading scorer, was on target again after 23 minutes, his fifth goal in consecutive matches and his 17th of the season.

But Uruguayan Gustavo Poyet equalised for Chelsea with a close-range volley in first-half stoppage-time.

Dennis Wise edged the home side in front with a diving header before Poyet grabbed his second and Dutch international Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink struck from the penalty spot to round off a comfortable victory for the Londoners.

Ipswich had to play out the closing minutes a man short when John McGreal was sent off for dissent.

Gordon Strachan had to endure calls for him to resign for the first time from Coventry fans following the 3-1 home defeat by Everton, goalless in five of their previous seven games, at Highfield Road.

Strachan was as he walked down the tunnel at the end of the match, while a large group of Sky Blues supporters chanted "We want Strachan out" and "Sack the board".

Scott Gemmill, Danny Cadamarteri and Kevin Campbell led the visitors three up after 31 minutes and Lee Carsley scored a late consolation for the hosts from the penalty spot.

Everton manager Walter Smith said: "We are very pleased with that performance. In the first half of the game in particular I thought we played very well and caused them quite a few problems."

"I am delighted to get a result like that in what has been trying circumstances. Smith had been down to just 11 fit senior players before the game."

Darryl Powell put Derby in front at home to fellow strugglers Manchester City only for Steve Howey to equalise in a 1-1 draw at Pride Park.

Honours were also even at White Hart Lane where Tottenham and Southampton played out a goalless draw.

Charlton entertain London rivals West Ham at the Valley on Monday.



Inter Milan's Javier Zanetti (L), Luigi di Biagio (C) and Lazio's Karel Poborsky get in a tangle during their Serie A clash at Rome's Olympic Stadium on January 20. - AFP photo

Serie A

Lazio back in the running

MILAN, Jan 21: Lazio proved they will not surrender their Italian First Division title without a fight, beating struggling Inter Milan 2-0 at Rome's Olympic Stadium on Saturday, reports AFP.

Argentinian striker Hernan Crespo continued his recent good form to put the defending champions a goal up early on after linking up with Czech Pavel Nedved.

Inter, deprived of injured striker Christian Vieri, wasted several opportunities in the first period and were made to pay when Chilean Marcelo Salas killed the game with a 75th-minute penalty after a foul on

another Czech, Karel Poborsky. Once again Lazio fans lived down to their reputation persistently racially abusing Inter Milan's Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf, who originally hails from Surinam.

They also issued death threats to Italian referee Massimo De Santis - who was not even refereeing the match - whose controversial decision to rule out an apparently legitimate equaliser for Parma's Fabio Cannavaro against Juventus last season almost cost the Roman side the championship.

De Santis, the sporting justice system has absolved you but ours has sentenced you to death," said a banner.

But on the field it was Lazio who prevailed, continuing coach Dino Zoff's 100-percent record since succeeding Sven-Goran Eriksson and ensuring the former goalkeeper put one over his friend and teammate in Italy's 1982 World Cup winning side. Inter coach Marco Tardelli.

Earlier Saturday Bologna beat Verona 1-0 with a brilliant individual effort from Tomas Locatelli who beat three defenders before firing home with his left foot from outside the penalty box.

The pick of the Sunday programme is the trip of Serie A leaders AS Roma to the San Siro to face AC Milan.

Second-placed Juventus visit Perugia where they lost the title on the last day of last season.

Sahara Millennium Cup

Yugoslavia, Chile reach semis

NEW DELHI, Jan 21(AFP): Results from the Sahara Millennium Cup football tournament on Saturday:

QUARTER-FINALS

At Calcutta Chile 2 (Sebastian Gonzalez 38, 50) Iceland 0 H: 1-0

At Goa Yugoslavia 2 (Ilic Sasa 30, Igor Bogdanovic 45) Romania 0 H: 2-0

Semi-finals: Bosnia v Chile; Yugoslavia v winner of Jordan/Japan