

Tragic

AP, Mexico City

A day after helping his Mexican team win, Pachuca's star striker Pablo Hernandez Gomez died Monday in a car accident in central Mexico along with his wife. He was 23.

His two children, ages 1 and 3, were being treated for injuries at a nearby hospital, Pachuca's Coach Andres Fassi said.

The Argentine player overturned his BMW on a highway between his soccer team's hometown of Pachuca and the town of Huicapan, just north of Mexico City. Police said he was speeding and lost control of his car.

Gomez, who started playing for Pachuca a year ago, helped the team win Mexico's winter soccer season championship in 1999, scoring five goals in the last three games of the tournament.

On Sunday, he helped Pachuca beat Toluca 2-0 after passing the ball to Pedro Pineda, who scored the final goal of the game.

Car mishap kills

Reggae Boy

Malcom

AFP, London

Jamaica midfielder Steve Malcom has been killed in a tragic car accident while travelling home after his side's friendly match against Bulgaria on Sunday, the Press Association reported Monday.

Malcom's team-mate and travelling companion Theodore Whitmore, who plays for English Third Division outfit Hull, escaped with injury and is said to be in a stable condition.

The duo were on their way to Montego Bay when the accident happened at Spring Hill, Jamaica. "The Jamaican FA are yet to contact us regarding Theodore, so at this time we cannot comment on his condition," Hull press officer Rob Smith told Sky Sports.

Police in Jamaica believe that the car overturned when the rear right tyre blew out.

It was the second time that the 30-year-old Malcom, capped 91 times for his country, and Whitmore have been involved in a car crash in Jamaica.

In 1998 Malcom and Whitmore were on their way to Kingston with then captain Warren Barrett and defender Durren Brown when the car in which they were travelling collided with another vehicle. Brown spent several days in hospital but the others suffered only minor injuries.

River Plate

okays Aimar

transfer

AFP, Buenos Aires

Officials of Argentinian club River Plate on Monday gave initial approval for the transfer of Pablo Payaso Aimar to top Spanish side Valencia.

The 20-year-old midfielder playmaker was set to travel to Spain on Monday night, according to River Plate's marketing manager Miguel Angel Vicente.

Aimar will be accompanied by club president David Pintado, treasurer Roberto Jakobi and adviser Eduardo Galeano.

Vicente said he was hoping for a fee in excess of 15 million dollars.

Beckenbauer's MU-like plans for Hitzfeld

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer has looked to Manchester United for inspiration in a bid to keep coach Ottmar Hitzfeld tied to the club long term.

Hitzfeld, who has been at the club since 1998 and still has two years to run on his contract, is ready to sign on the dotted line again after expressing his loyalty to the Bavarian giants.

"The feeling now is that I will prolong my contract with Bayern. The fact that I want to do so is a sign of my attachment to the club," Hitzfeld told Monday's edition of Kicker magazine.

The 52-year-old Hitzfeld, who is under contract until June 30, 2003, added: "There's a concrete offer for another discussion about this contract."

Club president Franz Beckenbauer has recently expressed his desire to keep Hitzfeld at the club in the same way that Manchester United successfully retained the services of Alex Ferguson.

However Beckenbauer's plans for Hitzfeld to lead Bayern to a five-year success plan could be scuppered as the German press is also touting Hitzfeld to take over from current national team coach Rudi Voller.

Voller, the former coach of Bayer Leverkusen, recently expressed a desire to return to "club management" instead of coaching.



Leeds United's Lee Bowyer (R) along with his legal team arrives at the Hull Crown Court on January 29.

Leeds trio in the dock

Football

AFP, London

The trial of three Leeds United footballers charged with assaulting a student outside a nightclub last January began Monday.

Midfielder Lee Bowyer, 24, of Leeds, who has played for England at Under-21 level, defender Jonathan Woodgate, 21, of Middlesbrough, and reserve team striker Tony Hackworth, 20, of Leeds, are charged with grievous bodily harm with intent on 19-year-old Asian student Sarfaraz Najeib.

Najeib, of Rotherham, South Yorkshire, was injured in an attack in Leeds city centre in January last year.

The three footballers all deny the charge. They also deny a

charge of affray.

England international Woodgate and his Leeds United team-mate Michael Duberry, 25, of Leeds, have also pleaded not guilty to conspiracy to pervert the course of justice.

Two other men, Neal Caveney, 21, and Paul Clifford, 21, both of Middlesbrough, deny causing grievous bodily harm with intent, affray and conspiracy to pervert the course of justice.

The trial of the six men is being held at Hull Crown Court. It is due to last up to six weeks and the first week is expected to be taken up with legal argument.

Najeib, a Leeds Metropolitan University student, was assaulted after being chased away from the Majestic nightclub on January 12 by a gang of men.

He suffered head injuries and a broken nose and leg in the attack.

Both Bowyer and Woodgate have played major roles in helping David O'Leary's young side challenge for honours this season and were both expected to feature in England's international line-up for this year's 2002 World Cup qualifiers.

However their future at the club remains shaky after club president Peter Ridsdale reiterated his stance on the matter last week.

Ridsdale, quoted in Friday's Daily Mail, said that any player found guilty of the charges would be sold.

"What I went on record as saying - and I stand by it now - is that if they are found guilty of the most serious charge, which is causing grievous bodily harm with intent, then there is no way they can play for the club again," Ridsdale said.

He suffered head injuries and a broken nose and leg in the attack.

FA charge Neville

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United defender Gary Neville was charged by the Football Association (FA) Monday following an incident in the tunnel after his side's shock 1-0 FA Cup home defeat against West Ham on Sunday.

England full-back Neville was reported to the FA for abusing an assistant referee in the tunnel after the Old Trafford club tumbled out of the competition to Paolo di Canio's second half goal.

Having received the report of referee Paul Durkin, the FA decided to bring the charge which, if

proven, is likely to lead to a three-match ban.

"The FA can confirm that Gary Neville has been charged with misconduct following an incident after the Manchester United-West Ham United FA Cup tie," said an FA spokesman.

"He is alleged to have used foul and abusive language towards a match official."

"He has 14 days in which to respond to the charge."

Durkin noted the incident immediately after the final whistle when Neville apparently berated an assistant referee over the amount of injury time played in the match.

Durkin added on four minutes but Neville thought there should have been much more due to West Ham's goal-kicks being taken by

defender Stuart Pearce after goalkeeper Shaka Hislop sustained a knee injury.

His view was shared by his boss, Sir Alex Ferguson, who fumed: "He (Durkin) added four minutes on but I felt it should have been a lot more than that. They don't really take time, they just guess it."

Neville, 25, remained tight-lipped about the incident, instead choosing to rue his side's profligacy in front of goal.

"Following our exit the feeling around the camp was one of disappointment," Neville wrote on his official website.

"We wanted to win the competition and we probably had enough chances to do that but we just couldn't get that critical goal and we paid the price."

Premiership preview

Leaders' light may go out

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United face a daunting task at the Stadium of Light Wednesday in their quest to lift their seventh Premiership title in nine seasons when second-placed Sunderland host the runaway leaders.

Reigning champions United hold a 13 point lead over Peter Reid's Black Cats with just 14 games of the season left.

But Sir Alex Ferguson's 'Red Devils', who have lost just once on their Premiership travels this season, will have their work cut out if they are to end Sunderland's unbeaten home record in front of a 48,000 sell-out crowd.

Sunderland have dropped just eight points out of a possible 36 on home soil, and with a Champions League spot up for grabs United can expect a tough time.

United may also be suffering from an FA Cup hangover after their shock exit on Sunday when visitors West Ham booked their fifth round place by upsetting the Old Trafford club 1-0.

The bad news for United is that Sunderland striker Kevin Phillips, who has found the net 10 times in the league, feels he is a better player than last season when he topped the Premiership's goal-scoring charts.

His recent form has made him one of the favourites to play for England against Spain next month in Sven-Goran Eriksson's first game in charge.

But the 27-year-old hitman is happy to concentrate on his club form.

"I feel very content with my football now," said Phillips.

"My all-round game has come on this season and I feel happier when I come off the pitch."

"Obviously I'm going to be judged on goals, like on Sunday (in a 0-0 draw at home to Sunderland) people said I had a bad game because I didn't score."

"But there's more to football than that and I'm content with the way I'm playing."

Chelsea will be looking to climb the table and into a European qualification spot when they host Newcastle at Stamford Bridge.

Coach Claudio Ranieri appears to be getting his message across even though the Italian has yet to master the English language.

Sam Dalla Bona, another Italian, who has started regularly in the Chelsea midfield since Ranieri's arrival, believes the coach has no problem communicating with the players.

"There is really no problem. It only takes a minute for everyone to get the message. The press are

Agali Nigeria's Footballer of the Year

AFP, Lagos

Victor Agali, who plays for Hansa Rostock, has been voted Nigeria's Footballer of the Year by the country's sports writers.

The Hansa Rostock striker beat 2000 African Nations Cup super sub Julius Aghahowa and Arsenal star Nwankwo Kanu to win the individual award organised by the Sports Writers Association of Nigeria.

Contreras charged in false passports affair

AFP, Monaco

Ex-Monaco defender Pablo Contreras was charged by Monte Carlo police here Monday for using a false Italian passport while he played for the French champions, a French judicial source has revealed.

The Chilean player, who recently signed for Argentine side Racing Club, becomes the latest French league player to be snared in the French League (LNF) and police investigation into false player passports.

Earlier this month 1976 European Cup finalists St Etienne were stunned as they dropped three league places to 14th place after being docked seven points by the league's judicial commission.

St Etienne's Brazilian forward Alex and former Ukrainian goalkeeper Maxim Levitsky were found to be in possession of false Portuguese and Greek passports respectively. Both were banned for four months and the club's president-elect Gerard Soler was also banned for a year.

The French league stipulates that only three non-European Union (EU) players be allowed on the pitch at any one time. This rule, inspired by the Bosman ruling, has rendered EU passports a golden currency in Europe and can ease a player's transfer from a non-EU country rather significantly.

If Monaco are found guilty of allowing Contreras to play with false documentation they could be docked league points, which would lead the club into the relegation zone.

Contreras was sidelined by the club earlier this month when suspicion was aroused that he might have a false passport.

Contreras, who maintains he has an Italian father, could also be banned from playing for his new club. The player is due to appear Tuesday at a LNF hearing in Paris.

FIFA concerned about WC 2002 co-hosts' delay

AFP, Cannes

Delays in the organisation of the 2002 World Cup being co-hosted by South Korea and Japan has forced FIFA to put in a special team to help the two countries be ready in time.

"Some areas of the organisation are behind schedule, in some cases up to six months, so we are going to put our own people in to help get everything up to speed," FIFA secretary general Michel Zen-Ruffinen told AFP here on Monday.

"It is the first time we have ever had to do it," he added.

But Zen-Ruffinen stressed that there was no risk of the World Cup not taking place.

"The World Cup will go ahead as planned. Stadium wise everything is fine. It is simply in some areas, such as delays in getting sponsors, that we have fallen behind," he said.

Zen-Ruffinen said that cooperation between the two organising committees has been excellent, the two sides meeting regularly.

When FIFA announced in 1996 South Korea and Japan would co-host the 2002 World Cup after one of the most bitter multi-million dollar bidding wars there had been dire warnings that it would never work.

The then FIFA president Joao Havelange said he had grave doubts about the compromise that was reached.



An AFP file photo of Chilean player Pablo Contreras.

Fergie's money on Hammers

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson reckons West Ham's name could be on the FA Cup this season after they turned the record book on its head to beat the English Premiership champions and Cup favourites 1-0 at Old Trafford on Sunday.

Winning the cup requires the odd bit of luck and Ferguson felt West Ham got every break going in the fourth round match as they registered their first win at Old Trafford in 15 years to end United's Treble chances.

United spurned several good chances and Ferguson claimed they were denied a clear penalty for handball before Paolo di Canio scored in the 75th minute when the United backline, including Fabien Barthez, stopped because they thought the Italian was off-side.

Ferguson said: "Sometimes your name is on the cup and maybe it's going to be West Ham's

year. "I think looking at their team and the players they've got up front, they've every chance of winning the cup."

"You see how they performed against us and there's no reason why they couldn't go all the way."

If the London club are going to win the cup for the first time since 1980 they will have to do it the hard way.

After being drawn away to the Premiership's best team, they were handed a trip to Sunderland, the second-best side, in the fifth round.

Manager Harry Redknapp refused to be daunted and he said: "It's a tough game for us, but I think the second-best team is Arsenal or Liverpool or Leeds."

"It will be a tough game up there, but we've been up there once this year and drawn 1-1 and played ever so well."

"So if you can come to Old Trafford and get a result then you've got to believe you can go anywhere."

West Ham had lost their 11 previous visits to Old Trafford, including a 3-1 defeat on New Year's Day.

Redknapp, who managed

Bournemouth when they knocked United out of the cup in 1984, had clearly learned from that loss.

Redknapp said: "It was a poor performance on New Year's Day, but they were absolutely different class."

"We got overrun. We played with a back four and they gave us problems at the back. "This time we played with three at the back and the whole thing worked well for us."

Ferguson knew Redknapp was going to reshuffle his hand for the match, but that did not lessen his disappointment at going out of the cup.

Missing out last year - United played in the World Club Championship in Brazil instead - had made him even more determined to do well this time.

He said: "I always felt when we knew the cup draw that it would be a different game from the last game because I knew they'd changed their system."

"We can have no complaints about being knocked out, absolutely no complaints."

"It's disappointing because we really wanted to have a go at it this year."

Pharaohs' Moroccan spell on

AFP, Johannesburg

Egypt were unable to shake off a World Cup jinx at the weekend and had to settle for a 0-0 draw against Morocco in a Group C qualifier.

It was the fifth time the North African giants have met in elimination games over 20 years and the Egyptian Pharaohs have yet to score, never mind win.

They certainly had enough chances before a sell-out 100,000 crowd at the International Stadium in Cairo, but tame finishing, bad luck and some great saves from Ben Zikri foiled them.

The failure to score took its toll with the most capped footballer in the world, 33-year-old striker Hossam Hassan, substituted with 15 minutes left by veteran coach Mahmoud al-Gohary.

"It is strange to be so unlucky, but I do not want to hear any pessimistic talk. We can still qualify for the 2002 World Cup," said Al-Gohary, a former army officer who

has had several stints in charge of the national team.

Belgium-based teenager Ahmed Hossam headed against the

was seven months ago. An early Ousmane Sambedou goal for the Guineans was cancelled by Peter Mponda.

Racist Verona fans

AFP, Rome

The issue of racism in Italian football once more reared its ugly head Monday following Verona president Gianbattista Pastorello's remarks that he feared a fan backlash if he signed a black player.

Pastorello made the remarks Sunday night when he was asked about a possible exchange deal that would see his star striker Emiliano Bonazzoli move to Parma with Cameroonian forward Patrick Mboma moving the opposite way.

In reply the president said: "If Bonazzoli left they would put me on the grill. If you add to that the arrival of a coloured player considering our supporters..."

On Sunday Verona fans lived up to their racist reputation by verbally abusing Parma's French World Cup-winning defender Lilian Thuram, who is black. Pastorello apologised to the player personally afterwards.

On Monday Pastorello backtracked on his reported remarks, saying he had only intended to address the anger of supporters if Bonazzoli had left.

But Italian Olympic movement (CONI) president Gianni Petrucci has written to Pastorello asking him to clarify his remarks and remind him that the sporting governing body was 'rigorous and intransigent' in its treatment of racism.

Italy's Culture Minister Giovanna Melandri, whose portfolio includes sport, said she was disconcerted, writing to Petrucci: "I can only express my disappointment in face of such remarks."

Pastorello's untimely remarks follow a series of racist incidents in Italian football which, around the terraces of Serie A, have been most notably characterised by the widespread racist abuse of players.



Portugal and Real Madrid superstar Luis Figo (C) poses with the trophy for the Person-of-the-Year at the International Gala Bola in Santa Maria on January 29. On the right is Figo's Real teammate Raul and on the left, the team manager Jorge Valdano.