

Best in hospital

AFP, London

Soccer legend George Best was back in hospital Monday believed to be suffering from pneumonia.

A spokesperson for Belfast City Hospital said she could not comment on his condition.

It is understood Best, 54, was admitted on Friday night, apparently suffering from breathing difficulties.

"His condition is not life threatening," said Best's manager Phil Hughes. "He is being treated with antibiotics. Alex (Best's wife) is at his bedside."

Best has a home near the County Down fishing village of Portavogie, south west Ireland.

Last March the former Manchester United and Northern Ireland star was admitted to hospital in London with liver problems and warned to stay off alcohol for good.

Best, famed for his football genius and hard-drinking lifestyle, was voted European Footballer of the Year in 1968, the same year he helped Manchester United to win the European Cup for the first time in their history.

Viola killed in car crash

AFP, Rome

Former Juventus and Lazio player Nando Viola died Monday after a road accident, ANSA news agency reported.

Former midfielder Viola, 50, died shortly after arriving in hospital following a collision between his scooter and a car in the Viale Parioli.

A report on the incident will be handed to the relevant judicial authorities.

Sir Alex can't believe it

AFP, London

Alex Ferguson admitted Monday he is surprised at Manchester United's runaway English Premiership lead.

United are 15 points clear at the top of the table and British bookmakers are already paying out on them retaining the title - even though there are still 12 games left.

Ferguson expressed his surprise at having such a big advantage at this stage of the campaign but refuted claims that the standard of the Premiership is poorer than in years gone by.

"We've had some help with other teams cutting the throats of each other in the last few weeks, but we didn't expect to be in this position," Ferguson told the Manchester Evening News.

"The standard of the premier division is not lower. If you look at the number of quality players that have been brought into the premier division it (the standard) can't be lower."

Life without Iuliano

AFP, Turin

Juventus and Italy defender Mark Iuliano faces a month on the sidelines after injuring ligaments in his left knee during Saturday night's 2-1 defeat by Atalanta in the Italian Serie A.

Doctors examined his injury Monday and it is thought it will be 20 days before he kicks a ball and a month before he plays competitively.

As a consequence, Iuliano - who has helped Juve retain a tight defensive record of only 15 goals conceded in 17 games - is also likely to miss Italy's friendly international with Argentina in Rome on February 28.

His injury is a blow to Juventus who are locked in what looks like a three-way title battle with Roman clubs AS Roma and Lazio.

But there is better news for Juve in the news that club captain Antonio Conte should be fit to face Napoli this Sunday.

Vicenza chief quits

AFP, Vicenza

Vicenza president Arope Miola resigned Monday in protest at what he considers the bias against his Italian first division club shown by referees.

Miola announced his decision at a press conference at the club's Romeo Menti Stadium.

His decision comes 24 hours after the home 2-1 defeat by Udinese where referee Stefano Braschi had to be escorted by police to the motorway following the match after home fans reacted in anger to his decision to disallow a goal by Vicenza's Gianluca Comotto.

Italy's 'Socccergate'

AFP, Milan

The bogus-passport scandal rocking Italian football took on a new dimension Tuesday with two of the biggest names in the sport appearing before separate judicial panels.

The passport scandal is the latest headache for what is widely regarded as world football's most prestigious domestic league, which is also facing judicial inquiries on doping, alleged corruption of referees and racism.

Lazio's Argentine midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron appeared in front of a preliminary hearing in Rome that would decide whether his case should go to trial.

Veron, a key player in the team that won the Italian Championship last year, is suspected of using bogus papers in his Italian naturalisation process in an inquiry that has also implicated club president Sergio Cragnotti, the



JUAN VERON

tomato sauce baron.

Meanwhile, Inter Milan's Uruguayan forward Alvaro Recoba appeared before magistrates from the northern city of Udine who last week indicted him for possessing an allegedly false passport.

After his interview Recoba, who last month signed a contract that reportedly makes him the highest paid player in Italy, was due to take a flight for his homeland to regularise his papers.

Inter Milan director general Gabriele Orlandi was also charged

last week.

But Veron and Recoba are just the two biggest names in a spreading scandal with seven top-flight clubs - AC Milan, Inter Milan, AS Roma, Parma, Napoli, Bari and Udinese - being examined by Udine magistrates.

Twenty-four players will help that inquiry with Roma's Brazilian 1994 World Cup winner Cafu, Udinese's Argentinian Roberto Sosa and Inter's Argentinian skipper Javier Zanetti perhaps the best known.

Magistrates in Turin, Genoa, Vicenza, Milan have also opened files.

Meanwhile, the professional game's governing body the National Football League Monday referred two Brazilians with first division club Vicenza - Dede and Capucho - to their disciplinary committee.

First division rules impose a cap of three non-European Union players in a single team and five in the pool of players eligible for one club, meaning clubs have an interest in getting players registered as EU nationals.

So far football authorities have not penalised clubs but on Saturday Fabio Capello, coach to league leaders Roma, said clubs that breach rules should be docked points, as has already happened in France.

Lazio responded to Capello's outburst on Monday by saying that they would sue him as they believed his remarks prompted the 3.55 percent fall in the club's share value Monday, the first day of trading after Capello's comments.

Other judicial inquiries have tarnished the image of the game.

Turin magistrate Raffaele Guariniello is probing allegations of systematic doping and presumed corruption of referees.

Last week Verona magistrates opened a dossier on the racist ambience at first division side Verona after club president Giambatista Pastorello said he would not dare sign a black player because he feared the reaction of supporters.

Lazio's Yugoslav international defender Sinisa Mihajlovic is also under judicial investigation for alleged racist remarks made to Arsenal's French international midfielder Patrick Vieira, born in Senegal.

He is also suspected of encouraging fans to unfurl a banner in

praise of murdered Serbian warlord Zeljko Raznatovic, better known as Arkan, who had been indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the time of his death.

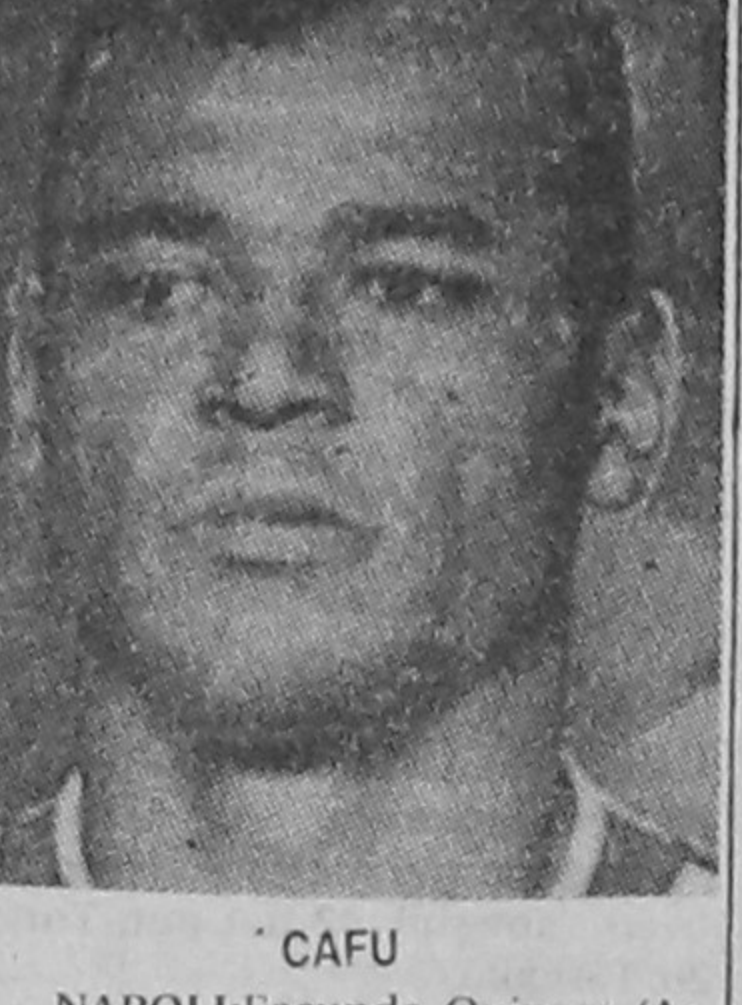
BAD BOYS

LAZIO: Juan Sebastian Veron (Argentina)

UDINESE: Warley Silva dos Santos (Brazil) Udinese, Egorinho Amaral de Castro (Brazil), Mercado Alejandro Da Silva (Paraguay) Udinese, Roberto Sosa (Argentina), Christian Diaz (Argentina), Mauro Navas (Argentina), currently playing in Spain, Delio Cesar Toledo (Paraguay)

AC MILAN: Andres Guglielminpietro (Argentina), Fabrizio Colocini (Argentina), Nelson de Jesus Silva Dida (Brazil), Roberto Fabian Ayala (Argentina), now playing in Spain, Jose Antonio Chamot (Argentina)

BARI: Pasqual De Gregorio (Chile), Diego Fernando Markic (Argentina)



CAFU

NAPOLI: Facundo Quiroga (Argentina), Hector Pineda (on loan from Udinese)

AS ROMA: Aldair Nascimento Dos Santos (Brazil), Marcos Evangelista Cafu (Brazil), Antonio Zago (Brazil), Gianni Guigou (Uruguay), Fabio Junior (Brazil)

INTER: Javier Zanetti (Argentina), Alvaro Recoba (Uruguay)

PARMA: Mathias Almeyda (Argentina), Marcio Amoroso (Brazil)

SAMPDORIA (Division two): Ondo Jean Mekongo (Cape Verde), Ze Francis (Cameroun), Thomas Job Iyock (Cameroun)

VICENZA: Jedaiaas Capucho Neves (Brazil), Leoni Andre Augusto Dede (Brazil)

Lazio file suit against Capello

AFP, Rome

Italian champions Lazio are suing AS Roma coach Fabio Capello, a spokesman for Lazio president Sergio Cragnotti announced Monday.

Lazio blame Capello's weekend remarks that clubs who have fielded players with bogus identity documents should be docked points for the fall in value of their shares Monday.

Although Lazio beat Lecce 3-2 Sunday the value of their shares fell by 3.55 per cent.

Spokesman Guido Paglia said: "That is why we have opened a civil case against the coach."

Lazio's Argentinian midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron and Cragnotti are currently the subject of a judicial probe into allegedly fraudulent naturalisation papers for the player.

After sweeping through French football, the false passports affair has hit Italian football and Roma themselves were one of seven Italian first division clubs said to be under investigation by Udine magistrates Monday.

Capello said Saturday: "It is right that whoever has got it wrong should pay, also by losing points in the standings. But I repeat we are OK. But if one day it is no longer like that then it would be only fair for Roma to pay too."

Ronaldo escapes car-jackers

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil and Inter Milan forward Ronaldo fell victim to three armed car-jackers who held him up and stole his BMW in Rio early Monday morning, according to Brazilian news reports.

Ronaldo, who is currently recuperating in an attempt to make a second comeback from injury, told Brazilian television that a car blocked him in front before the three heavily armed men forced



RONALDO

him out of his car and drove off.

He added that one of the men recognised him and expressed "surprise" but "it was too late for them" to go back on their actions," he said.

The player, who was not hurt in the incident, was driving to his home in Barra da Tijuca and was confronted in the chic area of Sao Conrado. Police an hour found his car later close by. Ronaldo made an appeal for the robbers to return his identity papers.

Blame it on Vasco officials

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Vasco da Gama officials were on Monday facing up to a year in prison after a ruling that they were responsible for the stadium accident which injured more than 150 people late last year.

President Eurico Miranda and former president Antonio Soares Cascada were the guilty parties according to a report submitted by the expert leading the inquiry into the Sao Januario stadium disaster on December 30.

The Brazilian championship final was halted, when worn and rusty fencing collapsed onto spectators, and was eventually abandoned on the orders of Rio de Janeiro state governor Anthony Garotinho after 23 minutes of the return leg with the score at 0-0.

The clubs had drawn 1-1 in the first leg at Sao Caetano's Palestra Italia stadium in Sao Paulo.

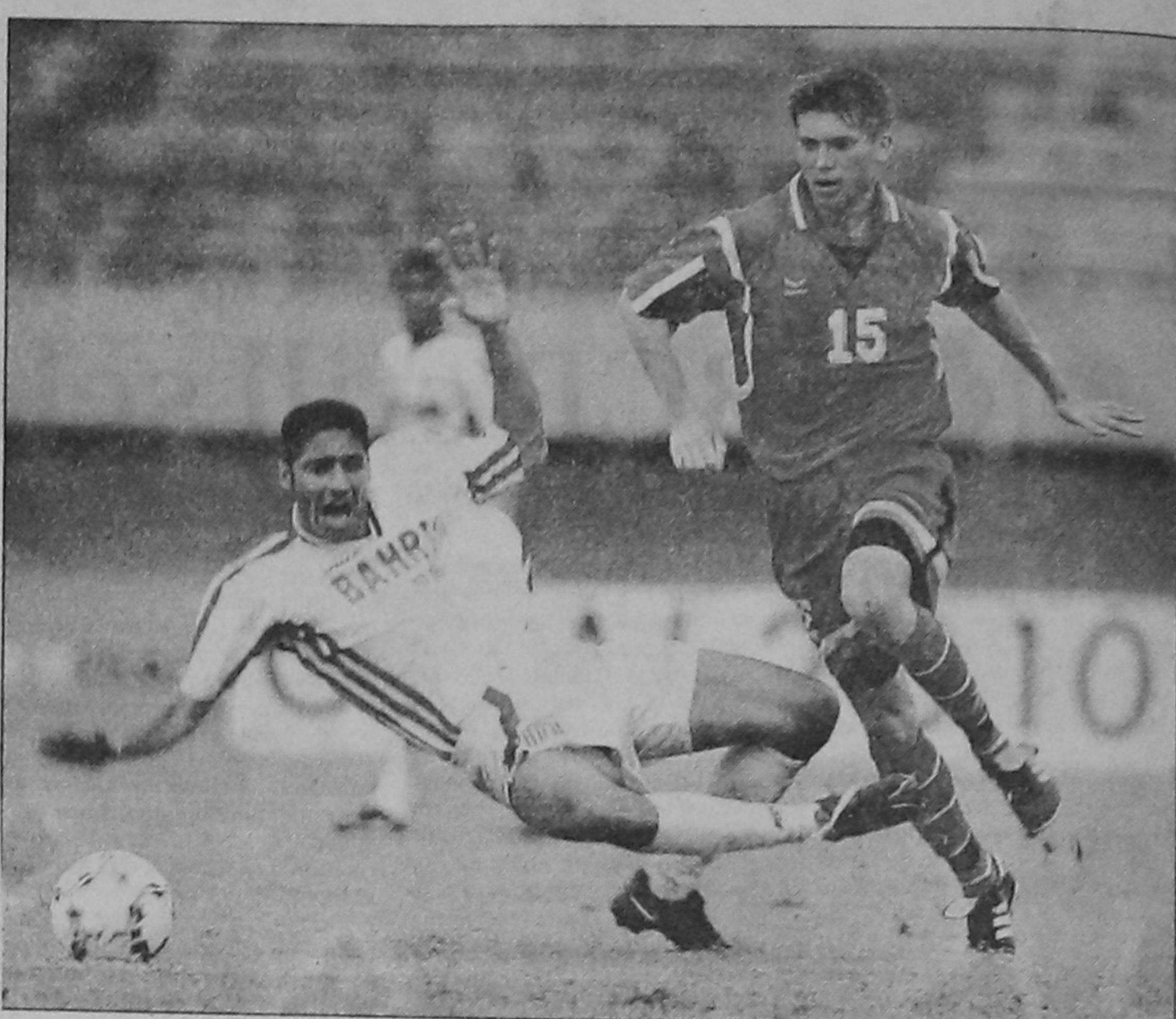
Vasco da Gama went on to win the rearranged second leg at Rio's Maracana stadium 3-1 to take the title.

The report has been sent to the Rio justice department who will either accept the findings and start legal proceedings or reject it. The penalty for such an offence is up to a year in prison.

Makaay out of action

AFP, La Coruna

Deportivo La Coruna striker Roy Makaay will be out for two weeks with a knee injury, club doctors of the Primera Liga club said on Monday.



Kyrgyzstan's Kudrenko Igor (R) faces a sliding tackle from Khamis Rafia of Bahrain during their World Cup qualifier in Singapore yesterday. Bahrain won 1-0.

French First Division preview David against Goliath

AFP, Paris

French league leaders Lille are in seventh heaven after claiming top spot for the second consecutive week but the northern minnows have a mammoth task ahead on Wednesday if they are to tie up second-place visitors Nantes.

In essence, this match tells a tale of success at either end of the financial scale.

Lille were only promoted this year after spending the past three seasons in Division Two. A financial minnow, the northerners from near the Belgian border have been as frugal in recruitment spending as they have in defence.

Enigmatic Bosnian coach Vahid Halilhodzic has instilled fighting spirit and defensive rigour which has given the Lillois the best defensive record in the league with only 18 goals conceded from 25 games.

With only nine league games to go, Lille could realistically be challenging for European honours next season.

Illustrious adversaries Nantes, meanwhile, sit second due to a much poorer defensive record - 32 in 25 games.

However, the Canaries - seven-time winners of the French league title - can sing freely about an attractive, flowing game thanks to the tactical creativity of much-heralded coach Raynald Denoueix.

The arrival of Romanian international striker Viorel Moldovan has proved a vital ingredient in what is now a lethal cocktail

equally containing the much-improving home boys Eric Carriere and Olivier Monterrubio.

Offensively, Nantes lead the league with 40 goals and have an attractive, flowing style to boot which should be enough to worry the Lille rearguard.

Lyon, meanwhile, could go provisionally top on Tuesday as they host Javier Clemente's perennially crisis-hit Marseille.

The southerners have struggled all year, and despite strengthening the midfield during the winter break, will not be looking forward to the short trip north to the Rhone valley in their bid to climb out of 15th place.

Lyon have climbed steadily, and convincingly up the league thanks to the combined efforts of experienced Brazilian striker Sonny Anderson and much-heralded youth team arrival Sidney Govou.

Jacques Santini's side also boast a solid defence, with only 22 goals conceded in 25 games, but the Lyon offence has most recently been illuminated by Govou, a France under-23 international who on recent form could be challenging for a place in the full France line-up.

A win for Marseille, though not impossible, would be folly to predict.

Bordeaux, sitting fourth three points adrift of Lille, hope the odds are favourable as resurgent French champions Monaco travel westwards from their southern gambling haven.

Monaco have enjoyed medico-

cre league success of late, but for coach Claude Puel the past two weeks, with as many victories, have led him to believe that the chips are not totally down after being bundled out of the Champions League and French Cup.

However travelling to Bordeaux is not always a pleasant experience.

The 1999 league champions, whose solid defence is held together by Fabien Barthez's number two in the France team, Ulrich Rame, will prove a veritable challenge to Monaco dangermen Marco Simone and Ludovic Giuly, who fired a hat-trick at the weekend.

Bordeaux also boast an above average offensive record of 34 goals in 25 games, with the ever-present threat of France international forward Christophe Dugarry, and Brazilian Pauleta, who has fired 12 goals so far.

Elsewhere, struggling Paris St Germain, who sit 11th, host Brittany side Guingamp, sitting eighth. Fifth-placed Sedan, who shot to fame as league leaders at the start of season, are at home to Troyes.

FIXTURES:

- Tuesday: Rennes v Saint-Etienne, Lyon v Marseille
- Wednesday: Bordeaux v Monaco, PSG v Guingamp, Lille v Nantes, Sedan v Troyes, Metz v Bastia, Strasbourg v Lens, Auxerre v Toulouse

Eriksson bans booze

AFP, London

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson is to implement a ban on alcohol during the build-up to international matches.

Eriksson, 53, will be in charge for the first time when England play Spain in a friendly at Villa Park later this month.

"If you play for England you don't need to drink wine or beer with your meals," Eriksson told

the BBC. "We are together to play football, not for anything else."

"I am a Swede, so I am used to alcohol myself. But if you are a professional footballer you have to behave like a professional footballer, especially if you want to play for England."

The former Lazio coach also indicated that he will look to play with a 4-4-2 system during his time in control.

"I believe in a back four," he said. "I have always played like

that, and there are very few times when I have chosen to play with three central defenders. I think we will start with four at the back."

"Many years ago, when I was younger, I chose my tactics first and then put in the players."

"But I have changed over the years. You have to pick the best players you can find and then choose your tactics - most important are the players."

He is undecided whether he will name David Beckham as England captain but praised the Manchester United midfielder for his last display as skipper when the team was under the guidance of interim manager Peter Taylor.

"I shall see when we all come together," he said. "He was captain for the last game in Italy and did a good job, but I have not made any decisions so far."

Eriksson is confident his team can still qualify for the 2002 World Cup finals.

"My honeymoon will last until my first game; then it will be over," he said.

"I know that if we play badly people will be critical, but it is the same all over the world."

"I hope we shall qualify for Japan and Korea, and I think so. I think we have a very good chance."

"But it is important to win the friendly against Spain and then our two games against Finland and Albania."



Brazil and Vasco da Gama superstriker Romario with the Best soccer player in America, 2000 trophy in Montevideo on February 4. Uruguayan newspaper El Pais awarded him the trophy after conducting an opinion poll among more than 300 journalists from nearly 60 countries in America and Europe.



A Singapore booter (L) trying to take the away from Kuwaiti captain Jassem Albuwadi (on the ground) during their World Cup qualifier in Singapore yesterday. The match ended 1-1.