

Houllier hoping to return in February

Liverpool's French manager Gerard Houllier revealed Sunday he hoped to be back in the hotseat at the Premiership leaders by February just four months after undergoing heart surgery.

The former French national coach, who guided Liverpool to three Cup victories last season and the European Super Cup this term, admitted he was still under doctor's orders to rest but he still was optimistic of undertaking light duties at the end of January.

"I am desperate to come back but I have to follow the doctors' instructions," said Houllier, who was in London to accept the sports team of the year award from the BBC.

"I hope by late January I will be back and then back to normal by February," he added.

Those doctors' orders mean he must have three weeks' rest away from the pressures of Liverpool and top-flight football before thinking about returning for good to the full time post.

Lebid lifts gold

World 2001 silver medalist Sergiy Lebid of Ukraine won the European Cross Country championships for the second time here on Sunday, while Spain edged out France to win the men's team competition.

The 26-year-old Ukrainian finished a clear eight seconds ahead of Dutch marathon specialist Kamel Maase to add the crown to his 1998 triumph, with Antonio Jimenez of Spain leading a three-way sprint in the final straight for the bronze medal.

France finished second in the team standings after holding a clear lead half way through the race with at least three runners in the top ten.

But a strong challenge by Moroccan-born El-Hassan Lahssini of France, who held third place for most of the 9.15 kilometre race evaporated about two kilometres before the end.

The highly-rated Frenchman appeared to struggle at one of two small hillsides that broke up the otherwise flat and dry 1500 metre grass circuit and lost touch with the top group to finish sixteenth.

"My initial tactics were to stay in the leading group, but when I saw Maase pull away in the second lap, I thought Lahssini would go after him - he didn't so I decided to chase and pass the Dutchman," Lebid said.

Maase, who took the lead on the second lap of the six lap men's race said he couldn't keep up with the in-form Ukrainian.

"I felt strong from the beginning and made an early break. I thought I was setting a strong pace but Lebid just passed me," Maase admitted.

Yamna Belkacem of France won the women's race in 15min 48sec over the 4.65 kilometre course and Portugal took the women's team title.

Belkacem beat off the challenge of Olga Romanova of Russia and Justyna Bak of Poland.

Belkacem admitted that the fast and largely flat 1500 metre grass circuit on a military training ground at the foot of the Swiss Alps put paid to French team tactics and the field quickly broke up into small groups.

"We were told to run an intelligent race and not to begin too quickly, but we eventually had to make a fast start so as not to lose touch with the top runners," Belkacem said.

Lebid looks to have a ready-made successor as 19-year-old Ukrainian Vasyly Matviychuk won the men's junior race, ahead of 18-year-old British long-distance hope, Somali-born Mohamed Farah.

The women's junior title was won by Elvan Abeylgesse of Turkey with a 18 second lead over Tatiana Tchoulakh of Russia.

South Korean stadiums ready for action

WORLD CUP 2002

All new facilities

1 Sogwipo World Cup Stadium	Completed December 2001	Cost \$98	Capacity 42,256
2 Kwanju World Cup Stadium	Completed September 2001	Cost \$123	Capacity 42,880
3 Pusan Sports Complex Main Stadium	Completed July 2001	Cost \$176	Capacity 54,534
4 Ulsan Munsu Football Stadium	Completed April 2001	Cost \$119	Capacity 43,550
5 Chonju World Cup Stadium	Completed September 2001	Cost \$114	Capacity 42,391
6 Taegu Sports Complex Stadium	Completed May 2001	Cost \$232	Capacity 68,014
7 Taejon World Cup Stadium	Completed September 2001	Cost \$116	Capacity 40,407
8 Suwon World Cup Stadium	Completed May 2001	Cost \$198	Capacity 43,188
9 Incheon Munsu Stadium	Completed December 2001	Cost \$195	Capacity 50,256
10 Seoul World Cup Stadium (Opening match)	Completed December 2001	Cost \$162	Capacity 63,961

Costs in US\$ millions

MU paying the price

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson claimed Sunday that the reason behind the Premiership champions slump in form was down to having not been challenged hard for their last two titles.

Ferguson who has not been talking to the press recently gave a rare insight into what he thinks is the matter at the previously dominant champions - who have won seven titles under him - though he made no reference to differences within the club particularly with England captain David Beckham, who has started the previous two matches on the bench.

United currently trail Premiership leaders Liverpool by 11 points after suffering a second successive home defeat on Saturday - Liverpool also have a game in hand on their bitter rivals.

Ferguson has admitted it will now take a miracle for United to reclaim the title in his final season at the helm but he wasn't going to let this season's dire results overshadow all that had been won in the previous campaigns.

"It's been a great spell for the club," said Ferguson, who was in London to accept a lifetime achievement award from the BBC.

"You have got to spread it around!"

"We have analysed almost everything you can analyse, and there could be some pertinent reasons. But we are going to have to find the answers to it because it's certainly not what we enjoy."

"There's one interesting factor; the last two championships have been won very easily, and we missed a dogfight and maybe we have to rediscover that. That's a possibility," added Ferguson.

Looking back over his 15 years at United, he admitted one moment stood out from the rest.

"The best moment was without question in Barcelona. It has to be," said Ferguson, recalling the 1999 Champions League final in the Spanish city when United beat Bayern Munich in memorable fashion.

"I know that you always point to the very first trophy you ever win because that gives you control of things - at Aberdeen we won the first championship in 1980."

"I thought that was the greatest thing in my life, but this charges you up and chases you on to other things. It's pointless looking back."

"Getting to Barcelona - I think it was a media thing, and having not won the Champions League put a certain pressure on me a little bit. Then to win the final that night - and the way we did it!"

The Scot would not be drawn on the issue of who would succeed him, though the list seems to diminish by the day, but admitted he had been impressed by Martin O'Neill's achievements in guiding Celtic to the treble in his first season in Scotland.

"Martin O'Neill has got that strength of character... not be daunted by the other side of Glasgow," he said.

Beckham eases nerves

Manchester United midfielder David Beckham on Monday quashed rumours that he is ready to leave Old Trafford by pledging his future to the reigning Premiership champions.

The England skipper, who was rested by United manager Alex Ferguson for the team's last two matches, is currently in talks over a new contract amid reports of interest from foreign clubs.

But the 26-year-old has reiterated his desire to stay at United in Ferguson's last season in charge before the manager takes up an ambassadorial role with the 1999 European champions.

"I think I've made the last 10 years my commitment to Manchester United, I think I've worked hard for them and I want to carry on playing for Man United. That's the team I support and the place where I'm most loved by the fans, and I love them," he told the BBC.

Beckham played down talk of a rift with Ferguson by saying the Scotsman was right to leave him on the substitutes' bench for Saturday's home defeat to West Ham and the Champions League win against Boavista last Wednesday.

"I think I did, deep down (need a rest). I'd never admit it to myself or anyone else but deep down I did," he added.

"All players need a rest or are left on the bench for many a reason. My situation has been well documented this week and of course I want to play every game, but that's not possible."

"When the manager decides to leave you on the bench, you respect that. I am not going to question the manager for whatever he does - it's his decision and I respect it."

Asked about life at United at the moment, he said: "It's great all the time. It's a little blip at the moment."

Beckham disagreed with Ferguson about one thing - the destination of this year's Premiership trophy.

Usual Adelaide pitch: Curator

Ground curator Les Burdett has forecast a traditional Adelaide Oval pitch for Friday's opening cricket Test against South Africa.

Burdett said the first round of Test cricket's Championship bout would be played on a typical Adelaide Oval pitch - with one slight bluish.

"They bounce the ball for the (Australian Rules) footy season so there is a little bit of a mark there," Burdett said Monday.

"Once you start rolling, it looks like it's a bit bare but it's not in anyone's way, it's just right dead smack in the middle of the pitch."

"It's only a very small area... and I'm better off having it in the middle of the pitch than having it on a length."

Burdett intimated fast bowlers would have as much influence as spinners, leading to the likelihood of leg-spinner Stuart MacGill's recall to the Australian XI being postponed.

He said the Test pitch was well grassed and would behave like traditional Adelaide Oval pitches - best for batting on days one and two before taking more spin and becoming "up and down" for quick bowlers on the final three days.

Burdett warned to read little into last month's result when South Australian leg-spinner Peter McIntyre claimed six second-innings New Zealand wickets to spin his side to victory in a match played on a pitch alongside the first Test strip.

"The New Zealand one (pitch) is not a good one to compare how the Test wicket is going to perform," he said, adding constant rain hampered preparation of the tour game pitch.

"This (Test) wicket, I can assure you, is going to be very, very traditional."

"The variance in bounce is accelerated as you go from day one through to day five, that's why they (captains) bat first because the ball does hit the middle of the bat and it's the best condition."

"It does play up and down towards the end and I think that's good for the game of cricket, that's where your results go."

"That's when it becomes harder to bat and that's when class comes in - guys that make runs on the last few days are bloody good batsmen who have good techniques."

Freeman set to return in March

Australia's Olympic 400-metre champion Cathy Freeman has set the Melbourne Track Classic at Olympic Park here on March 7 for her return to competition.

Freeman, who resumed training six weeks ago after a year's break from athletics, said she was satisfied with her progress.

"I'm training really well, I'm not ill, my level of enthusiasm is as high as ever," Freeman said Monday.

"I'm dearly looking forward to my first race which will be in March in Melbourne."

"I've had two track sessions and the body's definitely coming back."

Freeman, 29, had been about 10kg above her Sydney Olympics racing weight when she resumed training under coach Peter Fortune in Melbourne.

Now, with training and regular yoga and massage sessions, Freeman is getting back into competition shape - but said she wouldn't rush things if she felt she was stressing her body.

"I won't hesitate to overdo the rest and underdo the training," she said. "Health-wise I'm on top of things."

Freeman's main aim is the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in July next year.

Batistuta out until New Year

AS Roma's Argentinian forward Gabriel Batistuta will be out of action until the New Year, club coach Fabio Capello said Sunday.

Batistuta was replaced by Antonio Cassano after 37 minutes of the 2-1 victory over Parma and Capello confirmed that the 32-year-old would be absent for some time.

"Batistuta aggravated the knee injury he sustained against Lazio," explained Capello.

Today's Cryptiquip clue: T equals O

Jacques, Neil whack WA

South African batsmen Jacques Kallis and Neil McKenzie flexed their muscles with belligerent centuries here Monday, just four days before the first clash of a three-match series against Australia to decide the unofficial Test World Championship.

The two 26-year-olds brought some cheer to the Proteas' squad after the tourists' attack had been mauled by a second-string Western Australian batting line-up the previous day.

Kallis slammed 120 from 173 balls, smashing three sixes and 15 fours, as he chalked up his 23rd first-class century.

McKenzie cracked two sixes and 12 fours in his 114 - his 10th century in first-class ranks.

The pair made hay while the sun shone at the WACA Ground against an attack without three of their top pace bowlers, former Test pair Jo Angel (rested) and Matthew Nicholson (injured) and the fiery Brad Williams, who withdrew with bruised ribs the day before this match.

South Africa made 390 for five wickets in their second innings on the fourth and final day of the only first-class workout of the tour before Friday's big business at Adelaide Oval in South Australia.

The game ended early by agreement of the captains, Mark Boucher and Simon Katich, immediately after Lance Klusener had been dismissed for 50, leaving Boucher 25 not out.

The match was drawn, with South Africa leading by 157 runs after Western Australia compiled a massive 600 for eight wickets declared to establish a first innings lead of 233.

Veteran opener Gary Kirsten also had an extended workout, spending just over two and a half hours at the crease while crafting an unflustered 59 (10 fours).

The 34-year-old left-hander from Western Province was angry with himself after he limply pushed back a cunningly flighted ball from former Test left-arm spinner Bradley Hogg to be caught and bowled.

Kallis and McKenzie - born five weeks apart in 1975 - savaged the State bowling in the second session, slamming the first 150 runs of their 161 together in only 117 minutes after runs had been scarce in the morning session.

They were especially savage on Hogg, who conceded four sixes, and the State side's other left-arm spinner, Brad Oldroyd, who was hit for one six.

Makeshift opener Jacques Rudolph made 12 before being trapped by medium-pace Gavin Swan.

He had not added to his overnight 12 when he finely edged the ball to wicketkeeper Ryan Campbell.

Rudolph, who had been promoted to an opening role in the absence of the injured Herschelle Gibbs (resting with a groin strain), must be rueing a missed opportunity to fashion a big score on the placid wicket to further his claims for a place in the side for Adelaide.

He has yet to appear in a Test, though he did play in the third match of a three-game series against India after the fixture had been denied Test status by the International Cricket Council (ICC).

Rudolph may still find that his two-hour 59, in the number three position, in the first innings will earn him an Adelaide cap.

SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard at the end of the four-day game between South Africa and Western Australia at the WACA Ground on Monday:

SOUTH AFRICA: First innings 367 (M Boucher 134, J Rudolph 59, N McKenzie 35, G Kirsten 31; Nicholson 5-68, Karppinen 4-110)

WESTERN AUSTRALIA: First innings 600 for eight declared (S Meuleman 109, M Nicholson 101 not out, G Hogg 90, M North 71, S Katich 66, M Goodwin 61; M Ntini 2-108, L Klusener 2-96, C Henderson 2-120, A Donald 1-100)

Second Innings

Kirsten c and b Hogg	59
Rudolph c Campbell b Swan	12
Kallis c Campbell b Hogg	120
McKenzie c Goodwin b Karppinen	114
Klusener lbw Hogg	50
Boucher not out	25
Extras (b-5, w-1, nb-4)	10
Total (For 5 wks in 98.5 overs) 390	
Fall of wickets: 1-40, 2-117, 3-278, 4-324, 5-390	

Bowler

	O	M	R	W
Swan	22	6	69	1
Karppinen	22	6	85	1
Oldroyd	19	3	64	0
Hogg	24.5	4	119	3
North	7	0	33	0
Hussey	4	0	15	0

Result: Match drawn.

Kasparov reaps rich

Through the tournament, the two Grand Masters played 20 games at various time controls for a total purse of 500,000 dollars. Kasparov earned 255,000 dollars and Kramnik 245,000.

They drew four games at regular time controls. They played six games of rapid chess. Kasparov and Kramnik each won one game, and the rest were drawn. That left Sunday's 10 rapid games.

Kasparov won the first game and Kramnik was lucky to draw the second. The next three games were drawn. Then Kasparov broke the match open with three consecutive wins. Kramnik won the ninth game and the last game was drawn.

In blitz games, each player gets five minutes for the entire game. With so little time, the quality of play goes down. But the number of errors makes draws less likely so the games become more interesting for average players to watch. They are more tactical and less strategic.

A few blocks away, the rival FIDE World Championship tournament is being held in the Kremlin. Defending FIDE champion Viswanathan Anand of India is pitted against Vassily Ivanchuk of the Ukraine in the semifinals, while Russia's Peter Svidler plays Ruslan Ponomarev of the Ukraine. That tournament had an off day on Sunday, with play resuming Monday.

Since 1993, chess, like boxing, has had two world champions. In that year, Kasparov broke away from FIDE and formed the Professional Chess Association. He defended his title under the PCA's auspices in 1993 and 1995. But the PCA was dissolved in 1998.

Today was not my day," Kramnik said afterward.

Chess Grand Master Garry Kasparov destroyed Braingames world champion Vladimir Kramnik on Sunday in a series of blitz chess games, walking away with the bigger paycheck on the final day of their exhibition tournament.

Kasparov won 6.5 to 3.5 in the final match of the Botvinnik Memorial Tournament, named after the former Soviet world champion Mikhail Botvinnik.

It wasn't as close as this score would indicate since Kasparov probably missed two other chances to win and Kramnik's only win came in the ninth game after the series had been decided.

"Today was not my day," Kramnik

Japan edge out SA

South Africa opened scoring through Mike Cullen in the 8th minute but Japan levelled in the 25th minute when Ryuji Furusato converted a penalty corner.

Justin King restored South Africa's lead by pouncing on a penalty corner rebound early in the second half.

But the Japanese never gave up fighting and were rewarded when skipper Takahiko Yamabori sent in a reverse stick hit past Staniforth in the South African goal in the 51st minute.

The turning point of the match came shortly afterwards when Malaysian umpire Ravinderpaul Singh temporarily suspended two South African players, Clyde Abrahams and Gareth Murray.

Japan took advantage of the lack of numbers in the South African defence to score the winner through Naohiko Tobita in the 58th minute.

"We are happy with the win. Today we created about five goal-scoring chances but managed to put three away. In the previous matches we created more but lacked the killer instinct," said Japanese team manager Toichi Nagai.

For South African coach Rob Pullen the umpiring was what cost his team the game.

"Last we sound like sore losers Japan played well to and deserve the win. But things would have been different had the umpire not sent my players off," said Pullen.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

- ACROSS**
- 1 Urban transport
 - 4 To and —
 - 7 Pack animal
 - 8 Flowers, for short
 - 10 Untamed
 - 11 IRS examinations
 - 13 "Candle in the Wind" subject
 - 16 Plippen
 - 17 Actress Uta
 - 18 Annoy
 - 19 A-number-one
 - 20 Graf —
 - 21 Blokes
 - 23 Urge
 - 25 Attention getter?
 - 26 Salver
 - 27 CSA soldier
 - 28 Accordion feature
 - 30 Spring month
- DOWN**
- 1 Indian actress
 - 2 Soap
 - 3 Hotel employee
 - 4 Water slide
 - 5 Health-hazard gas
 - 6 Valhalla
 - 7 Vegan's no-no
 - 8 Jets and Sharks, e.g.
 - 9 Bar
 - 10 Some radios (Abbr.)
 - 12 Soap actress
 - 13 Eraser-head director
 - 14 Barks shrilly
 - 15 — out a living
 - 19 Highlander's hat
 - 20 007, for one
 - 21 Inexpensive
 - 22 Ancient language
 - 23 Mesopotamia, now
 - 24 Developed
 - 25 Branch
 - 26 Tin
 - 28 Blue-prints
 - 29 "Eraser-head" director
 - 30 Avian mimic
 - 31 Pub offerings
 - 32 Certainly
 - 34 Thought
 - 35 Jam ingredient?
- Solution time: 26 mins.**
- PTIPE PHT ARICH
 AMEX HAT SORE
 GAIRP ERASHIPRAID
 KNEEPIAD ELEGY
 CIAN MAE
 AMITY LILYPAD
 LOG JIG AGO
 FOOTPAD FAZIES
 HAM YAM
 AISOIT NOTTEPAD
 SCIORIPIAD RICLE
 TAPIA AVE CLIEA
 ONYX REL EKED

CRYPTOQUIP

V W Q K E O I T B B Q D N
 I Q E M M P D W F I N D P . F
 V T K G Q I F O F D G I F K Y N

H I T E Y E - H T M E .

Yesterday's Cryptiquip: LAST WEEK MY MOM GAVE ME A VERY NICE DIGITAL WATCH. I CRIED. "LOOK MA, NO HANDS!"

Today's Cryptiquip clue: T equals O

The Cryptiquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.



France's S Herbrecht (L) is about to smash during their women's World Handball Championship fixture against Ukraine in northern Italian city of Bolzano on December 9. France won the game 33-25.