

Off-pitch dramas and an Owen

Football

REUTERS, London

There were great games, great goals and real upsets throughout the year -- but soccer in 2001 has been overshadowed by off-field developments whose repercussions are likely to have an impact well into 2002.

The collapse of ISL-ISMM, the company that marketed soccer worldwide on behalf of FIFA for almost 20 years, has had an enormous impact on the financial health of the world governing body and the office of FIFA president Sepp Blatter.

While the average fan takes very little notice of the arcane world of high soccer politics and finance, the fall-out from ISL's collapse with debts of nearly 300 million pounds has affected fans -- even if they have not realised it.

The collapse led to the cancellation of FIFA's 16-team World Club championship which was due to have been played in Spain in August and has also left Blatter fighting his corner since.

A lack of secure finance also nearly led to the cancellation of the Copa America, which was eventually played, and if that was not bad enough for FIFA, the fall-out from the attacks in the United States on September 11 led to main insurers AXA cancelling its policy for next year's World Cup finals in South Korea and Japan.

While the more alarmist end of the tabloid press throughout the world predicted that meant the end of the World Cup itself, FIFA managed to bounce back within three weeks with another major insurer.

And while next year's finals may well pose some unique problems as it is being jointly hosted, FIFA ended the year on a positive note, announcing a 51 percent increase in the amount of payouts each of the 32 finalists will receive.

The collapse of ISL and the aftermath of September 11 were not the only problems the game's rulers had to grapple with in 2001 as the early months of the year were dominated by massive changes to the laws governing transfers and freedom of contract.

The labyrinthine arguments between FIFA, UEFA and the European Union finally ended in an agreement which seemed to please most parties, or at least most parties



PHOTO: INTERNET
SIMPLY RED: Liverpool's ace striker Michael Owen (2nd L) celebrates with teammates Emile Heskey (L) Stephen Gerrard (2nd R) and Robbie Fowler after scoring against Arsenal during the FA Cup final at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff in May.

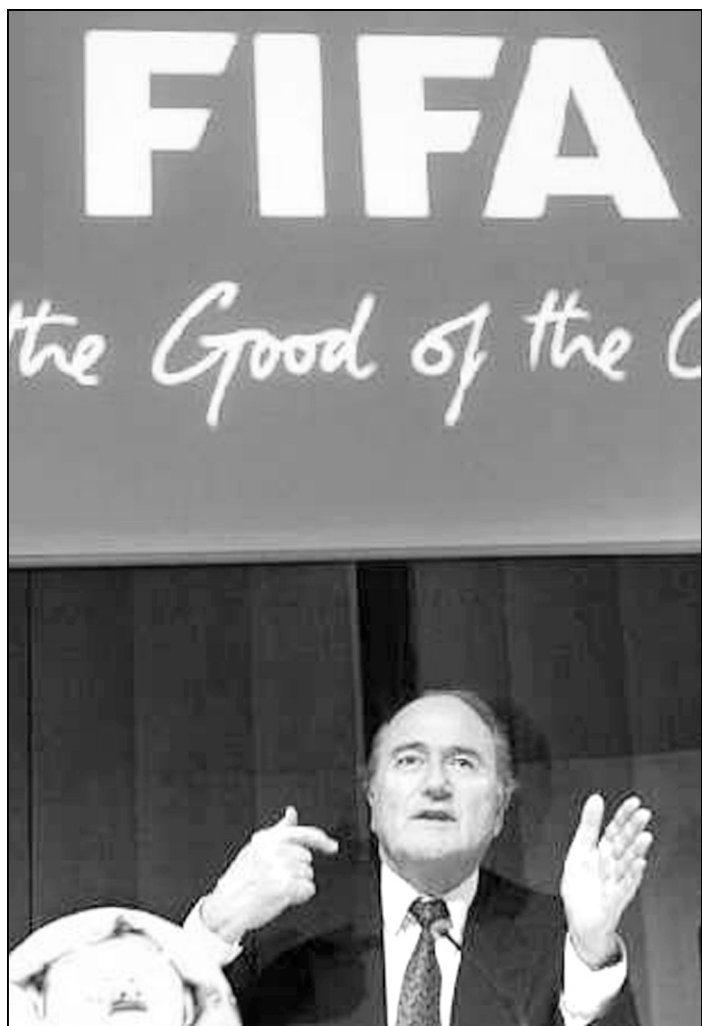


PHOTO: INTERNET
A file image of Sepp Blatter, president of FIFA, during an executive committee meeting.

seemed pleased that an agreement was reached.

One effect of the new rules is that transfer windows are being introduced on a Europe-wide basis next year, which also sees the start of FIFA's long-awaited unified international calendar.

This long overdue change should help both clubs and players solve the age-old club versus country dilemma up to a point but it is hard to see it disappearing.

One match more than any other in 2001 proved that the demands on soccer's players are almost at breaking point.

Australia organised a friendly with World Champions France in Melbourne on November 11 as part of the home side's preparations for their World Cup playoff against Uruguay and sparked off angry reactions from 12 European clubs who lost their French and Australian players for the fixture.

The match itself ended in a 1-1 draw and was a long way from being the most memorable international of the year.

There was only one challenger for that particular honour and it took place in Munich on September 1 when England crushed their old rivals Germany 5-1, their first win in Germany since 1965, Germany's first defeat at the stadium since 1973 and only their second defeat ever in a World Cup qualifier.

Michael Owen's hat-trick for England and strikes by his Liverpool

team mates Steven Gerrard and Emile Heskey put England on the verge of qualifying for the World Cup finals, which they duly did a month later with a draw against Greece.

Liverpool's fortunes were linked with Germany throughout a momentous year for the English club in which they won five trophies between February and August.

The most astonishing game of all was played in Dortmund in May when they beat Spanish side Alaves 5-4 in one of the most dramatic European cup finals ever played.

They also won the English League and FA Cups -- two strikes from Michael Owen giving them a late 2-1 win over Arsenal in the first FA Cup final to be played in Cardiff's Millennium Stadium -- the Charity Shield and the European Super Cup, in which they overcame Bayern Munich 3-2 in Monte Carlo.

Owen ended the year voted European Footballer of the Year but Bayern also enjoyed great success of their own, winning the Bundesliga title with a goal from virtually the last kick of the season, the European Champions League on penalties and the World Club Cup with an extra-time winner against Argentina's Boca Juniors in Tokyo in November.

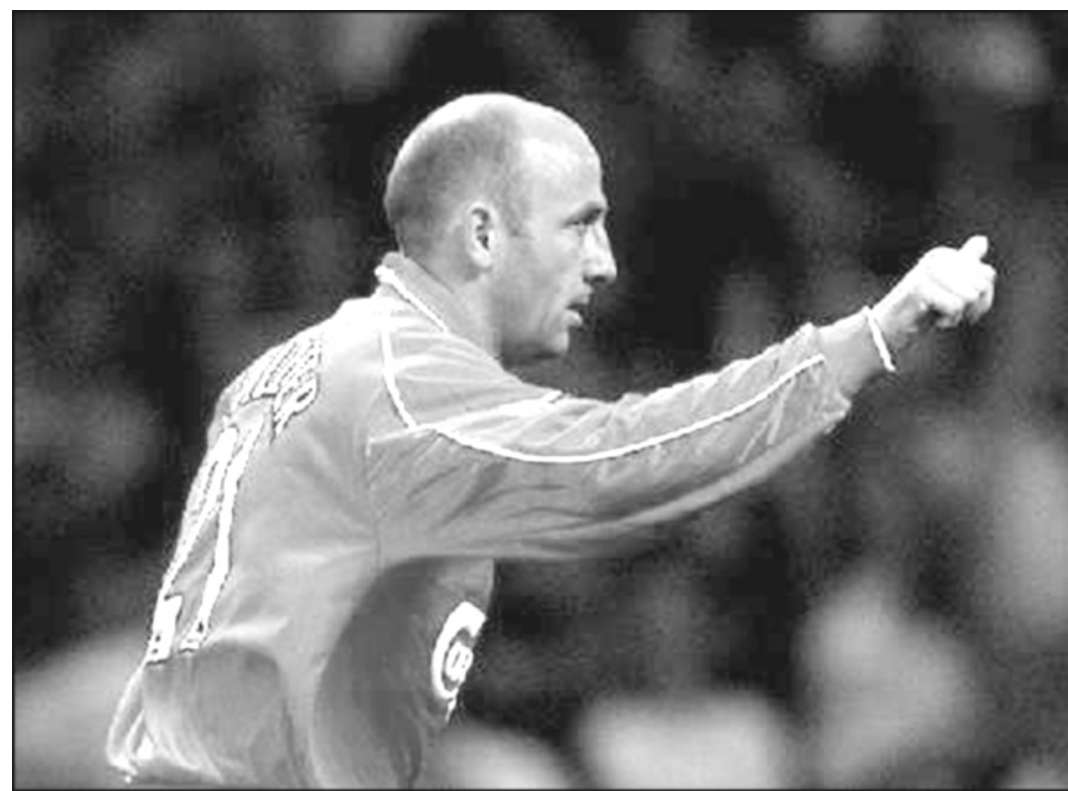
Although Boca failed to win that prize, Argentina's national team played some astonishingly good football throughout the year and emerged as favourites to win the World Cup next year.

They finished 12 points clear at the top of the South American qualifying group in which Brazil, for so long the epitome of everything that is beautiful in the game, struggled to qualify.

Eventually Brazil did, finishing third in the group, but their year was littered with defeats to countries they would have swatted away imperiously in the past -- Honduras, Australia, Cameroon among others.

While Brazil were in decline, there was unbridled joy in Colombia when the national team won the Copa America for the first time but by the end of the year Brazil were in the World Cup and Colombia had missed out.

Brazil will be hoping for better things next year, as will their talismanic striker Ronaldo, who ended the year back in action after missing most of the last two years through injury.



GARY McALLISTER

McAllister begins at 37

Football

REUTERS, London

When Gary McAllister awoke on December 25, his 37th birthday, he could have been forgiven for pinching himself to check that the last 12 months were not one incredible dream.

At an age when most players have long hung up their boots, the former Scottish international midfielder has enjoyed the best year of his career.

His contribution to Liverpool's remarkable treble last season was recognised by UEFA when he was short-listed alongside Real Madrid's Raul and Bayern Munich's Stefan Effenberg, the eventual winner, for the award of Europe's most valuable player.

He has carried on the good work this season, helping Liverpool to the top of the premier league and into the second phase of the Champions League.

It has been an incredible turnaround for McAllister, who was seemingly easing towards retirement at Coventry City when Gerard

Houllier took him to Anfield on a free transfer in July 2000.

Injury and Houllier's rotation policy limited his early impact but he gradually made his mark and was one of the successful penalty-takers in the League Cup final shoot-out victory over Birmingham City.

His only other goal in his first 39 games up to mid-April came in a league game against Coventry but the final month of the season proved to be the most explosive of his career.

First came his 40-metre injury-time free kick that earned a 3-2 victory over Everton -- "the defining moment of our season" said Houllier -- followed four days later by the penalty that beat Barcelona in the UEFA Cup semifinal.

He scored in the next three league games -- all wins -- only to be left on the bench for the FA Cup final against Arsenal.

However, with Liverpool being overruled in midfield, Houllier sent on McAllister.

His unfluffed ability on the ball and dead-eye passing helped to swing the game and he assisted in setting up Owen for the equaliser as Liverpool fought back for a 2-1 victory.

This performance kept him in the team for the UEFA Cup final against Alaves when he had one of his best games, scoring a penalty and setting up three of Liverpool's other four goals, including the own-goal winner, in their astonishing 5-4 success.

There was still time for more glory as he set up the opening goal in the 4-0 victory at Charlton Athletic in the last league game of the season which clinched a Champions League berth.

McAllister's special season was all the more remarkable as his wife endured a difficult pregnancy before undergoing treatment for cancer.

"I can hardly believe what is happening to me," McAllister said. Houllier immediately offered the Scot a year's extension to his contract, which he happily signed.

He carried on this season as he finished last, scoring as Liverpool beat Manchester United 2-1 in the Charity Shield and impressing in the 3-2 victory over Bayern Munich as the European Super Cup became Anfield's fifth trophy of 2001.

Now McAllister hopes to help his club claim their first league title for 12 years.

Zidane won't let Real do

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid star Zinedine Zidane, the world's most expensive player, is determined to give his Spanish employers value for money.

The French former world footballer of the year, who cost Real a record-breaking 64.9 million dollars when he moved from Juventus in the summer, said he hoped to give the club four years of quality football in return.

"No player in the world is worth that money, but that's just the way things are," Zidane said of his staggering transfer fee.

"It's important to me now that I show on the pitch why the club spent that money on me. I've four years to give back everything."

"I don't know if I can do it but I'm going to try," Zidane told sports daily Marca.

The gifted midfielder, who has finally hit his stride at Madrid after a patchy start to the season, added that he expected to end his career in five years time.

"I only want to play another four or five years of football. Playing and enjoying are the only things that interest me," said Zidane.

"Football has given me a lot, and I don't want for anything."

Meanwhile the Frenchman said he prefers playing football in Spain, where the domestic game allows him to parade his talents more freely.

"For my skills, Primera Liga is much better than Italy, because I have more freedom," he said.

Romario best in Brazil

INTERNET, Rio de Janeiro

Vasco da Gama star Romario was named the best Brazilian player of the year 2001 according to the poll conducted by Brazilian newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo.

The controversial forward became his country's leading scorer for the first time in his career, with 21 goals in 18 out of 27 matches.

As a result of the poll, Romario, who will turn 36 on January 29, received 6 votes, passing ahead of his main opponent Kaka from Sao Paulo. Then come Alex Mineiro (Atletico Paranaense), Anilson (Sao Caetano), Franca (Sao Paulo), Esquerdinha (Sao Caetano) and Marques (Atletico Mineiro).

Bayern banking on Ballack

Football

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich will be the team to beat next season after winning the battle to acquire Germany midfielder Michael Ballack, coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said.

After beating out rival bids from Real Madrid and Barcelona, the European champions said Ballack had opted to exercise an exit clause in his contract with Bayer Leverkusen and move to Munich next summer in a record-breaking deal costing Bayern an estimated 100 million marks.

"We are delighted that he has decided to come to Bayern Munich," Hitzfeld said in a statement on the club's website. "It's the right decision. With the addition of Ballack

and Sebastian Deisler it will be tough for anyone to beat us."

Famous for snapping up the best German talent, Bayern announced in October that Hertha Berlin midfielder Deisler would move to Munich at the end of the current season.

Deisler, 21, and Ballack, 25, are expected to form the core of a team forced to restructure after captain Stefan Effenberg, 33, departs in June.

But Bayern lost the fight for SC Freiburg sweeper Sebastian Kehl who will move to Borussia Dortmund instead. Bayern, who have won the title in the last three seasons, went into the winter break in fifth place, five points behind Leverkusen.

Ballack was the highest-scoring midfielder in the Bundesliga in the first half of the season with nine

goals and led the team to the top of the league.

He also took Germany to a berth in the World Cup finals with scintillating displays in two playoff matches against Ukraine in November. He scored the equaliser in the first match in Kiev and then hit two more at home to lead Germany to a 4-1 win.

"Merry Christmas - Ballack is coming to Bayern," the team wrote on its website. "What a wonderful Christmas present for Bayern Munich!"

German media said the total volume of the deal for Ballack was estimated at 100 million marks -- the first time in German soccer history that the triple-digit barrier had been broken.

Bayern Munich will pay Leverkusen a fixed transfer fee of 28 million marks for Ballack, whose contract with Leverkusen runs through 2005.

It will also pay Ballack 32 million for a four-year contract that runs through June 2006, and on top of that a 30 million signing bonus.

"I have decided to take advantage of an exit clause in my contract with Bayer Leverkusen and will join Bayern Munich at the start of the next season," Ballack said in a statement.

"This was not an easy decision. The main reason is the sporting perspective. Bayern Munich is in every regard the top club in Europe."

"I had two more lucrative offers from abroad," Ballack said, calling his decision "a move for Germany." He said Voeller and Bayern Munich manager Karl-Heinz Rummenigge advised him to stay in Germany until after the 2006 World Cup.

Ballack has played for Leverkusen for the last three years and helped the team to two second place finishes.

He began his career at BSG Motor in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz) in formerly communist east Germany and later for Chemnitz FC in the second division.

"We are incredibly delighted," said Bayern commercial manager Uli Hoeness. "Next year will be a good year for us."



MICHAEL BALLACK

Ronaldo's caution

REUTERS, Rio De Janeiro

Brazilian soccer star Ronaldo urged Brazilians not to underestimate the teams the Brazilian national team will face in the first round of the World Cup soccer tournament, noting that Turkey could be the dark horse of the group, which also includes China and Costa Rica.

"Compared to the others, this group is theoretically easy. We must perform well strategically and physically. Turkey could be the surprise. We must be careful not to underestimate our opponents," the star from Italy's Inter told the press in Rio de Janeiro.

The forward also said he was very confident about Inter's upcoming season and satisfied with his performance level in recent games.

Ronaldo noted that the injury he suffered last Sunday against Piacenza - a muscle spasm in his left thigh - was his fault because it was the third game he had played in 10 days.

"That serves as a lesson. I don't think it's too serious. It was exactly the same thing I felt against Lecce. I will have to sit out for two weeks," Ronaldo said in reference to the Nov. 4 game in which he suffered the same injury.

The former Barcelona forward will rest during his time in Rio de Janeiro and undergo therapy.

Robson dismisses retirement talk

AFP, London

Newcastle boss Bobby Robson believes he has at least another season as a topflight manager left in him and has no plans to retire, it was reported here Wednesday.

The 68-year-old former England manager, who has guided Newcastle to the top of the Premiership standings, said he would only consider quitting St James Park when he lost his third football.

Robson, a lifelong Newcastle supporter, is on a 12-month rolling contract at the club. He has steadily transformed the Magpies' fortunes since arriving two years ago, when they were bottom of the league.

"I haven't made up my mind about when I will finish but I still see myself here this time next year. Then I will look at the situation again," Robson told the Daily Mail. "I have no formalities in the Premiership."

Football

INTERNET, London

Former Liverpool midfielder Steve McManaman, now with Real Madrid, believes that Nicolas Anelka, who signed from Paris St Germain on loan for Liverpool at the weekend, can be a success at Anfield if he learns from his mistakes, the Mirror reported.

Macca, who played with the 22-year-old controversial French international at Real Madrid, said:

"I think the problem with Nicolas was that when he came to Madrid he was a very young man, only 20 or so, and he didn't speak the language."

"I know how hard it is, because I arrived at the same time and I have to stress that I got on very well with him. I knew him from the Premiership. He spoke a little bit of English and we got on together. But he didn't speak any Spanish, and the basic problem was that he didn't

get on with any of the Spanish players. I think there is a perception that he is a little bit arrogant and a bit of a loner, but I think the real problem is that people didn't understand him."

"They thought he was aloof, when in fact, he's just a very shy lad and, remember, he was very young and moving to a country where he didn't speak the language."

"The way he acted, for me, was pretty normal given the circumstances. I think anyone at his age would have seemed the same, especially if they were as shy as him. But it was misconstrued and some of the Spanish lads didn't like him. There were problems, especially when he was saying that no one was passing to him and things like that, but I think he was misunderstood."

McManaman added that for all the problems people say the French ace has, nobody can argue with his talent.

"I think even the people at our club who didn't like him would be the

Colly eyes Bradford post

Football

REUTERS, Bradford

First Division Bradford City have parted company with manager Jim Jefferies, prompting former England striker Stan Collymore to apply for the job.

Chairman Geoffrey Richmond said on Monday that Jefferies had resigned on Sunday ahead of a league clash at Coventry City when Bradford were outplayed in a crushing 4-0 defeat.

"This resignation was accepted with immediate effect, subject to the manager agreeing to take charge of the team for yesterday's game at Highfield Road," the club said in a statement on its official website.

The departure of Jefferies followed a string of poor results by the club and criticism of his treatment of skipper Stuart McCall, whom he dropped from the squad last week.

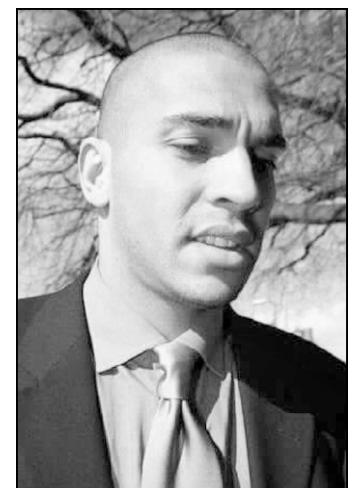
Bradford said youth team manager Steve Smith would take charge for the side's derby with Sheffield United on Wednesday.

Collymore's lawyer Jonathan Crystal told BBC radio that the former Bradford player would apply for the coaching position.

"I can confirm that Stan will apply for the job. He knows the club, players and chairman," Crystal said. "He has every confidence in his ability to do the job. He is presently talking to a senior football figure to

work with him."

Collymore, 30, retired as a player earlier this year after an unsuccessful spell in Spain with Real Oviedo.



STAN COLLYMORE

He joined the club from Bradford last season.

Dogged by off-field controversies, his career also included spells at Nottingham Forest, Liverpool, Aston Villa and Leicester City.

It was Jefferies who put Collymore on the transfer list when he took over as Bradford manager in November last year. The player then joined Oviedo last January.

Jefferies had indicated he was unsure whether he could carry on as manager without assistant manager

first to say that he was a fantastic talent and he did really well for us. "If he can just get on with it without any of the baggage, then he'll do great for Liverpool. He's a fantastic player, great pace and a really top-class finisher, so you are getting quality."

"I don't think it's fair to go on about the problems he had at Madrid. Maybe it was more difficult for him because of the circumstances when he left Arsenal, but now he's got a clean slate and he can show everyone. As I've said, if you are just talking about playing football, then nobody at Real Madrid would argue with Nicolas's talent."

"He played his part for us, because we won the Champions League in his only season and I must admit I thought it was a bit of a surprise he left after that."

"I think if people realise he's still young, and basically a very shy lad who suffers from pressures like the rest of us, then he can do really well for Liverpool," said the England international.

Billy Brown, who resigned on Friday. Brown had worked with Jefferies over a period of 14 years at four different clubs.

Jefferies is the 26th manager to part company with a British club so far this season. Gerry Francis resigned from third division side Bristol Rovers on Monday because of a family illness.

"It has been a difficult year with just 12 victories from 48 games played, relegation from the premier league, a disappointing current position of 16th in division one, the recent public disagreement between Jefferies and Stuart McCall, some very unpleasant letters to the manager and finally the departure of Billy Brown," the club said.

Jefferies took over from Chris Hutchings whose reign as manager was brief after Paul Jewell quit in June 2000. But he was unable to keep the club in the premier league with Bradford eventually finishing bottom.

He has struggled with a small squad this season and has been financially restricted with regard to signing new players.

Jewell, who became manager in 1998, guided Bradford into the premier league in 1999, and managed to keep them there against the odds the following year.

His departure at the end of the 1999-2000 season, when he felt he had taken Bradford as far as they could go, rocked the club.