

PSG talk to Kily

AFP, Madrid
France's Paris St Germain have contacted Valencia to discuss a possible transfer involving highly rated Argentine international attacker Kily Gonzalez...

Gonzalez, 27, has aroused the attention of PSG, who are on the lookout for a quick forward capable of unlocking hard-nosed defences. Gonzalez was a key member of the Valencia side that reached consecutive European Champions League finals in 2000 and 2001 but has fallen out of favour this term.

Kovacevic goes back to Sociedad

AFP, Saint-Sebastien
Lazio's Yugoslav international forward Darko Kovacevic has signed a record-breaking five-year deal with former team Real Sociedad...

Kovacevic, who has spent much of his time in Rome warming the substitutes bench, is part of a 5.5 million dollar deal although Lazio will retain 50 per cent of the player's rights.

It is the biggest transfer in Sociedad's history. The 28-year-old Kovacevic, who also failed to nail down a regular place at Juventus, became unsettled at Lazio when Hernan Crespo and Simone Inzaghi confirmed their impressive goalscoring partnership.

Daum reassures Besiktas

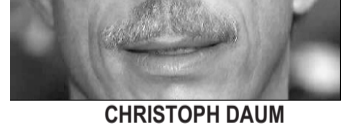
REUTERS, Berlin
Besiktas coach Christoph Daum plans to see out the season with the Turkish club regardless of the outcome of his drugs trial.

Daum, who was discarded as German national coach last year when the drugs scandal broke, faces charges in Germany of conspiring to buy 100 grammes of cocaine and illegally using the drug on 63 occasions.

"No matter what happens I will stay with Besiktas to the end of the season and fulfil my contract," Daum told German news agency SID.

Daum said he had told Besiktas president Serdar Bilgili of his decision last week. He had previously said he would decide whether to quit by Christmas.

Media reports had suggested the trial had put Daum, 48, under increasing strain and that he was



CHRISTOPH DAUM considering resigning from his position. He has been commuting between Istanbul and the German town of Koblenz where the trial is being held.

Besiktas moved top of the Turkish super league this week for the first time this season. After a slow start they have won their last seven matches and have 36 points from 17 matches.

"I love Istanbul and like working in Turkey," Daum said. "I have received the green light from Bilgili (for looking to sign players) on the transfer market."

"If Bilgili is re-elected president in March I'll stay on beyond this season."

Daum said the team needs to sign an additional striker and defender to improve their chances of winning the league.

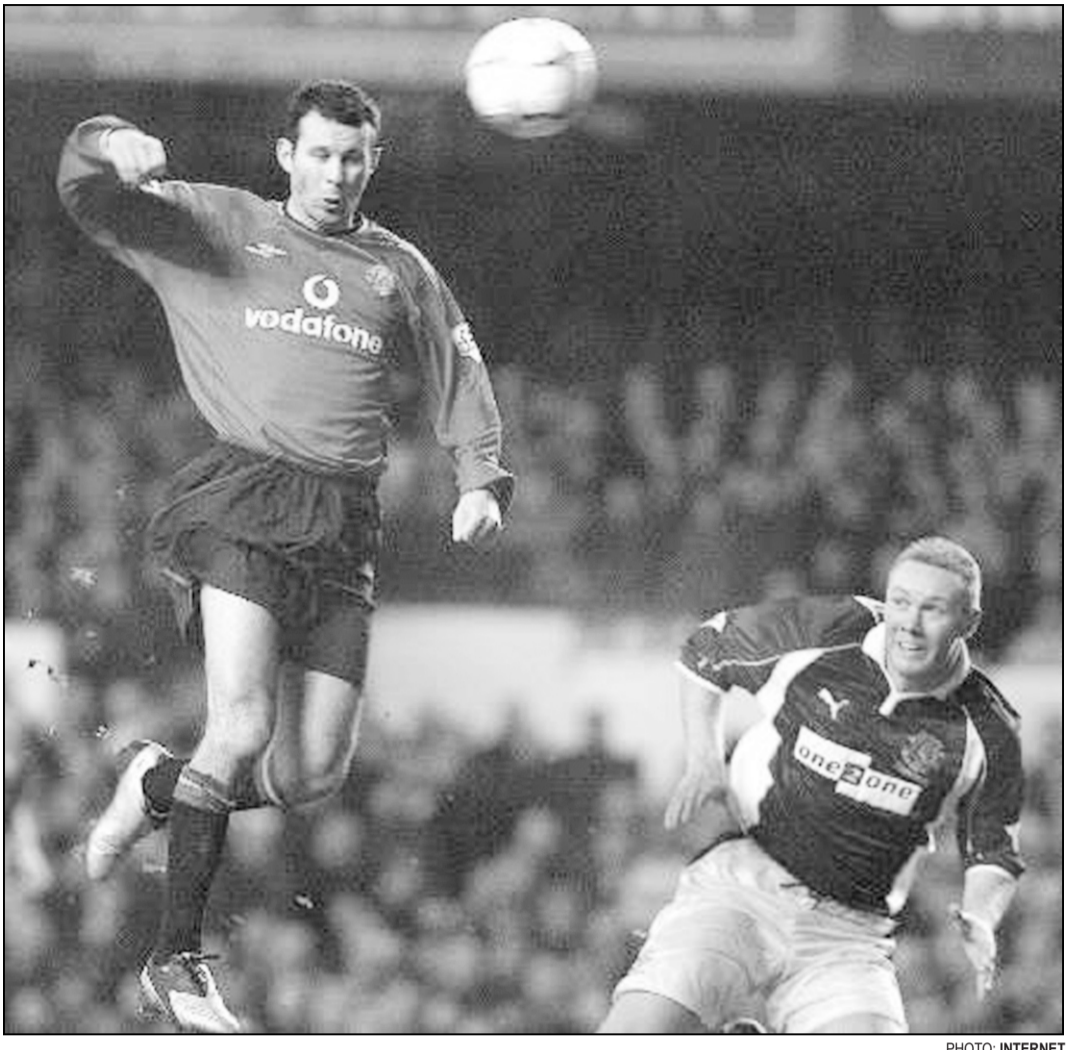
"If we want to win the championship we urgently need at least two new players," he said.

"I would be the happiest man at Besiktas if we can get a new striker and defender."

Daum testified on Friday he began taking cocaine three years ago because he was lonely after the collapse of his marriage. He apologised for lying and for making "a colossal mistake".

The scandal came to light last year when Daum was dismissed as Bayer Leverkusen coach and ruled out as the next Germany coach after testing positive for cocaine.

Daum, who first denied using the drug, could face up to five years in jail if convicted.



Manchester United's Welsh international winger Ryan Giggs (L) is about to score in a Premiership match against Everton at Goodison Park in Liverpool on December 26.

Premiership Magpies still in pole position

Football
Newcastle held onto first place in the English Premiership Wednesday with an impressive 3-0 win over north-east rivals Middlesbrough at St James's Park on a day when all top five contenders won.

Former England striker Alan Shearer's 10th goal of the season gave the Magpies a half-time lead before Welshman Gary Speed put the home side in control 13 minutes after the interval.

Frenchman Olivier Bernard came off the bench to wrap up the points seven minutes from time and seal Newcastle's fifth consecutive win.

However despite the three-point gap which separates United from second-placed Arsenal and Liverpool in third, 68 year-old manager Bobby Robson was not getting carried away.

"We're gradually getting better," he said. "That's five on the trot, and it's becoming better."

"But I won't change my stance. I still think we'll be there or thereabouts - but the teams below us today who have all won just have that little bit extra depth in quality and numbers, I think."

Robson added: "We'll just chip away. There's too much football for anybody to start talking about winning championships."

Newcastle had briefly surrendered pole position to Arsenal who beat London rivals Chelsea 2-1 at Highbury earlier in the day.

Substitute Sylvain Wiltord, who had only been on the pitch for four minutes, snatch the second-half winner after Sol Campbell had wiped out Frank Lampard's first-half opener for Chelsea.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger praised the spirit of his side as they recovered from going a goal down to snatch an important victory.

"We looked much sharper in the second half. We looked as though we were not quite with the pace of the game early on," Wenger said.

"But we got in at half-time and we wanted to turn things around, and this was another win that was down to the character of the team."

Liverpool ended their poor run with a 2-1 win against Aston Villa at Villa Park where on-loan French

striker Nicolas Anelka made his debut for the Reds as a second-half substitute. Jari Litmanen gave the visitors an early lead only for Lee Hendrie to level the score before the break.

the season following the young defender's conviction for affray a fortnight ago. Woodgate, who was sentenced to 100 hours community service and ordered to pay a club fine of eight weeks in wages, helped shore up a defence which leaked four goals at home to Newcastle on Saturday.

"It was a good, solid centre-half performance," added O'Leary. "We concentrated a lot better today at the back and that's where we have been giving goals away."

Reigning champions Manchester United kept in touch with the Premiership leaders by winning 2-0 at Everton with Welshman Ryan Giggs and Dutch international Ruud van Nistelrooy netting one goal apiece.

Former United player Jesper Blomqvist, who played in the Red Devils' 1999 Champions League final success, made his debut for Everton but the Swedish international came off in the second-half because of tiredness.

West Ham thrashed struggling Derby 4-0 at Upton Park where Frenchman Sebastian Schemmel gave the Hammers an early lead. Second-half strikes from Paolo Di Canio, Trevor Sinclair and Jermaine Defoe completed the rout.

James Beattie's 56th-minute goal eased Southampton's relegation worries with a narrow 1-0 win over Tottenham at St Mary's and Fulham were held to a 0-0 draw at home to London neighbours Charlton.

Leicester swapped places with Ipswich at the bottom of the table

Premiership's top six

Table with 5 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points. Lists Newcastle, Arsenal, Liverpool, Leeds, Man Utd, Chelsea.

pounds (16 million dollars) to buy 26-year-old Fowler last month, was delighted with his purchase. "I think what we've paid for Robbie Fowler is excellent business," O'Leary said. "Robbie is an intelligent footballer and a great goalscorer. I am sure he'll score goals for us for many years to come."

O'Leary gave Jonathan Woodgate his first league start of after George Burley's men won the basement battle 2-0 at Portman Road.

Marcus Bent and on-loan striker Sixto Peralto condemned Leicester to their 10th defeat of the season. At Ewood Park a Niall Quinn double, his first goals for 12 games, helped Sunderland complete a 3-0 victory over Blackburn. Kevin Kilbane completed a handsome win for the Weasiders.

Fergie behind Blanc

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson has again mounted a defence of Laurent Blanc who has been the target of criticism following recent defensive lapses by the side. Ferguson said that the veteran French defender had not been responsible for any of the goals conceded by the champions this season.

Despite a recent revival, United have conceded 28 goals in 19 Premiership matches. That is more than any other club in the top 10 and many have pointed to the introduction of Blanc, a free signing from Inter Milan in late August, as the reason for the shaky defence.

However, Ferguson believes the criticism is unjust and said of the 36-year-old: "I should have got him five years ago."

"They will all say he's slow and all the rest of it, but there is not one goal he has been responsible for this season - not one," he said following United's 2-0 league win over

him. "The French players all looked up to him as the man, and it's just unfortunate that he is getting the criticism that he is. "He's not the quickest. He never was the quickest, but that is never going to be accepted."

Blanc replaced Dutchman Jaap Stam in the centre of the United defence after Stam was sold to Italian side Lazio.

Koreans won't change ticket policy

AFP, Seoul
South Korean officials said Thursday they would not offer domestic-only World Cup tickets for sale in China and Japan, despite poor sales at home.

The Korean World Cup Organising Committee admitted that 150,000 tickets, or 32 per cent of total tickets reserved for sale in South Korea only, remained unsold.

"All the tickets allocated for domestic sale will be sold in Korea now that ticket sales have picked up sharply since the final draw," the committee said in a statement.

There are 1.46 million tickets for the 32 matches in South Korea, with 732,779 intended for the domestic market and 736,698 for overseas.

Ticket sales for most matches that do not involve the South Korean team have been slow, although tickets for all games involving China and the opening match between Senegal and France have sold out.

The committee insisted it would be able to sell all the remaining tickets by May 31 when the event starts in Seoul.

Japan and South Korea are co-hosting the sporting festival.

Romario thinking of Napoli move

AFP, Rio de Janeiro
Brazilian fringe international Romario said here Wednesday he is mulling over the offer of a move to Italian second division side Napoli.

Romario, who is currently in the middle of a financial dispute with his Brazilian club Vasco de Gama, gave no further details of the proposal.

The 35-year-old journeyman began his pro career with Vasco before moving to Europe and spending five seasons at Dutch side PSV Eindhoven, then two seasons at Spanish league giants Barcelona.

However relations with his present club have turned sour due to a dispute over money he is allegedly owed.

Former Brazil international favourite Romario, who has also played for Valencia in Spain and Flamengo in Brazil, is reported to be owed four million dollars.

Woodgate to get new deal

AFP, London
Shamed Leeds United star Jonathan Woodgate is set to secure his future at the club by signing a new and improved contract, it was reported Wednesday.

The 21-year-old defender, convicted of affray for his part in an incident which saw an Asian student viciously attacked, will sign a five-year deal worth 20,000 pounds (28,900 dollars), the Yorkshire Post reported.

England defender Woodgate could make his first league start for 11 months later today at Bolton. Leeds chairman Peter Ridsdale has confirmed he will meet

"We have offered Jonathan Woodgate a new contract. I have a meeting arranged with his agent at the beginning of next month but I fully expect the player to sign it," Ridsdale said.

The news comes just 24 hours after the club revealed that Lee Bowyer was set to pledge his future by signing a new five-year deal just a week after being placed on the transfer list.

Voller's villa catches fire

AFP, Leverkusen
The future home of Germany coach Rudi Voller has been ravaged by fire here Thursday.

Voller was not in the villa at the time and no-one is believed to have been injured by the overnight fire, believed to have been caused by an electrical fault.

Around fifty firemen were called to the scene and spent four hours putting out the fire at the three-storey home.

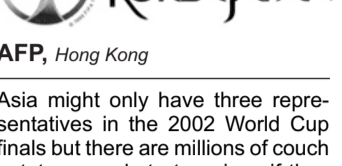
Pizzi loan helps Villareal

AFP, Villarreal
Villareal have countered the loss of star striker Martin Palermo by acquiring Rosario forward Juan Antonio Pizzi on loan, the Spanish first division club said Thursday.

Argentine international Palermo, whose leg was fractured by a falling advertising hoarding while he celebrated a goal during a match on November 29, will be out for up to six months.

Pizzi is no stranger to Spain having played with Tenerife, Barcelona and Valencia. And if all goes well he could earn himself a permanent move to Villareal who have paid Rosario - of the Argentine first division - 397,554 dollars for his services until June 2002.

Asia's television feast?



AFP, Hong Kong
Asia might only have three representatives in the 2002 World Cup finals but there are millions of couch potatoes ready to tune in -- if they can afford it.

Virtually every Asian country plans to broadcast at least some of the tournament's 64 games, but

boasting fewer than 2.9 million subscribers, it means more than 120 million Japanese will miss out on a third of the games, although subscriber numbers are expected to pick up as the May 31 kick-off approaches.

Koreans, Japan's fellow co-hosts, will fare better with the three leading broadcasters -- Korean Broadcasting System, Munhwa Broadcasting Corp. and Seoul Broadcasting System -- forming a single consortium to relay the

State-run broadcaster Doorarshan, which is free-to-air, is still fine tuning its scheduling but it is likely to be the same as in 1994 and 1998 when all matches were telecast live.

This is similarly in line for a football treat. The nation will for the first time broadcast nationally all matches live and without commercial breaks, although local broadcasters have yet to agree with local rights holder DhoSpaak Communications Agency which stations will show the games.

"Thai viewers will see the best and most efficient broadcast," a spokesman at the prime minister's office said.

The Vietnamese population will also get to watch the Cup for free. Tran Quang Tuan, Vietnam Television's deputy general director, said the official Vietnam Television will transmit all matches live and free-to-air.

Australians can rest assured that they'll get at least some of the games on regular TV, courtesy of Channel Seven. But how many is not clear. The station said it may on-sell some rights to Singapore Telecommunications' Optus pay TV.

Indonesia is also set for a footballing bonanza, but for a fee. The private RCTI network will broadcast all matches live, said Hadi (eds: one name), in charge of sports programming at the station.

"As an official partner we will broadcast live all of the matches. We will also air highlights, profiles and quizzes," he said, adding that the coverage is expected to reach half of Indonesia's population of more than 210 million people.

"Indonesians are crazy about soccer," he added.

Singaporeans will also have to put their hands in their pockets if they want to watch the drama unfold.

Singapore Cable Vision, the city-state's only cable TV service, has the exclusive rights to the Cup and will broadcast all matches live.

Malaysia may miss out altogether. Its satellite network has not confirmed if it will be covering the tournament at all.

A spokesman for the privately-run Astro network said the station was still discussing plans on whether to offer viewers live coverage.

"We have received a lot of requests to show it, but we have no confirmation for now," he said.



South Korean Women Cycle Association members with the soccer ball balloons ride in downtown Seoul on December 24 to promote the 2002 FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan next year.

despite massive interest, not all will get to view for free as pay TV coverage forces many hard-up fans to miss out on the footballing feast.

German media giant Kirch, which has secured the global television and radio rights to the 2002 World Cup, will charge television companies around the world a fee to broadcast matches during the tournament, many of whom will pass on the costs to viewers.

Not even co-hosts Japan will get to see all the matches for nothing.

While all games will be shown live via satellite, only 40, including Japan's three games in the preliminary round, the semi-finals and the final, will be shown free-to-air in the country, officials said.

With SKY Perfect Communications Inc. currently

All matches will be broadcast by at least one of the three television sets for no extra cost, a spokesman for the consortium said.

China will participate in the World Cup finals for the first time, but it remains unclear whether the nation will get to follow their team's progress.

State-run broadcaster China Central Television is still in negotiations with Kirch and CCTV officials confirmed they had yet to secure the rights.

Recent Hong Kong newspaper reports said a Hong Kong business had bought the distribution rights and had yet to decide whether to grant CCTV a slice of the action, threatening the viewing plans of hundreds of millions of Chinese.

AFC aiming for five in 2006

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Thursday said it was confident five teams from the region would be represented in the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

"By 2006, we expect to have five Asian teams represented in Germany," AFC general secretary Peter Velappan told AFP.

Velappan said the fact that the winners of the 2002 World Cup will not be given an automatic berth for 2006 would help Asia achieve its goal.

"By 2006, Asia would have the teams as well as the broad infrastructure in place to justify the claim for five (automatic) seats in 2006," he said.

that at least two Asian teams would reach the second round in 2002, co-hosted by Japan and South Korea.

"The quartet has all the talents as well as the determination but the lack of international experience and exposure playing in top professional leagues will prove to be a handicap," he said.

Velappan, who is FIFA's co-ordinating director for the 2002 World Cup, said the 10 stadiums in the two countries were ready.

He added that China's qualification for the first time had boosted ticket sales while security had been tightened inside the stadiums in the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks in the United States.

"I think these are the two safest countries to visit and fans can feel safe and secure in Korea and Japan," he said.

Velappan voiced confidence

Del Piero's revival

AFP, Milan
The year 2001 saw Juventus striker Alessandro Del Piero finally get his career back on track, a welcome tonic for Italian football fans ahead of the 2002 World Cup.

In January of this year Del Piero was still feeling his way back from injury that had blighted his previous two seasons and had left many wondering whether he would ever return to the same form that made him one of the world's top footballing talents. But by the end of the year Del Piero is at full throttle again, a welcome sight for Italy fans just five months before the 'Azzurri' bid for what would be a record-equalling fourth title - qualification was assured by Del Piero's free-kick in the 1-0 victory over Hungary at Parma.

On learning that Portugal's Luis Figo had won FIFA's World Player of the Year award and England's Michael Owen the European award (Ballon d'Or), the 27-year-old Del Piero showed his refound confidence when asked who would be garlanded next year.

"The race for next year's awards has already started and I hope to be among the contenders," he said.

At club level Del Piero has struck a lethal partnership this season with

Frenchman David Trezeguet, the pair having scored 17 goals between them in Serie A. It has been a similar story in the Champions League.

Del Piero is a survivor of the Juventus side that last won Europe's premier club competition in 1995-6 when he was part of the famous trident attack featuring Gianluca Vialli and Fabrizio

Victory in 1995-6 meant he had helped give Juventus fans a triumph they could really be happy about and he followed that up in November when his goal helped defeat Argentina's River Plate to win the Intercontinental Cup.

But despite a memorable year at club level, Del Piero flopped for Italy in Euro 96 as Italy were eliminated at the first hurdle.

The trophies continued to come at club level but still Del Piero disappointed with Italy and the 1998 World Cup in France proved equally disappointing.

In 2000 came the latest chance for Del Piero to shine but now there was a new threat in the shape of AS Roma's Francesco Totti, who had replaced Del Piero as the golden boy of Italian football.

He spent much of the tournament on the bench and when he emerged as a substitute in the final with Italy leading France 1-0 he missed two golden chances to kill the match - France took full advantage to win 2-1.

Some in Italy have not forgiven him. But after a year that has seen Del Piero emerge again as a genuine force in Italian football the year 2002 could be the chance for him to finally repay the debt.



DEL PIERO