



HAPPIER TIMES: Roberto Mancini being carried by fans after Fiorentina won the Italian Cup in June.

PHOTO: FILE

Mancini bids farewell

Football

AFP, Florence

Roberto Mancini quit as coach of strife-torn Italian side Fiorentina on Friday, the club announced.

Mancini had already offered his resignation to president Vittorio Cecchi Gori earlier in the week following the team's 3-1 defeat at the hands of Perugia last weekend.

Mancini said he was quitting because he feared for his family's safety after he was approached and threatened by a group of supporters near his home late on Thursday.

"The fear of disturbance to my wife and my three children persuaded me that my work in Florence cannot continue," he said.

Thursday had seen another day of farce at the Florence club whose finances are in a mess and internal division splits the boardroom.

Fowler's story

Football

AFP, London

Robbie Fowler said a training ground bust-up and a broken promise by manager Gerard Houllier over his decision to leave Liverpool and join Leeds, the Times newspaper reported on Saturday.

He said the bust-up with assistant manager Phil Thompson and less than frank conversations from Houllier led to him deciding to leave Anfield in favour of Elland Road.

Fowler also claimed people got the wrong impression of him after he was arrested, later to be released without charge, when a camera was damaged after a photographer took a picture of the England forward, dressed in army fatigues, asleep in a taxi on his way home from the Leeds players' Christmas party.

But Fowler, who has scored six goals in eight league games since his reported 11-million-pound (15.9-million-dollar) move from one Premiership title contender to another, knew it was time to move

to a new Houllier made him captain and reassured him about his future but left him on the substitute's bench.

"I still get on very well with Gerard and I don't want to say he forced me out, but I think people can read between the lines," Fowler told The Times.

A training round bust-up with Thompson saw Fowler left on the bench for the Charity Shield, which Liverpool won 2-1 against Manchester United, despite his decision to apologise to Houllier's assistant.

"Things like that happen on training grounds every day, arguments between players and coaches, but the amount of publicity it got was frightening," said Fowler.

"I missed out on another medal because of that and that is what hurt me more than anything."

Fowler claimed Houllier had promised him he would play in the Charity Shield but was left out of the side following the disagreement with Thompson.

The incident following the Leeds players' party, and the publicity it received, angered Fowler.

"People's first impression of me is that I am a bad boy, but people

who know me know that I am not a bad lad. I was at a new club and I wanted to settle down quietly and do my job."

Nigerian squad faces deadline

Reuters, Johannesburg

Nigeria could lose two players from their squad for this month's African Nations Cup finals if they do not send their list of 22 players to the Confederation of African Football (CAF), according to competition regulations.

Nigeria were the only team to miss Wednesday's deadline for the submission of squads and face a mandatory fine of 3,000 dollars, which coach Shabu Amodu said this week they would take in their stride.

But they now face being allowed only 20 players if they fail to submit their list to CAF headquarters in Cairo on Saturday.

Nigeria has hosts Mali, Liberia and Algeria in the competition involving 16 nations, which starts on January 19.

Bolivia offers warm-ups

AFP, La Paz

Bolivia will play friendlies against Brazil, Italy and Paraguay as their three opponents warm up for this year's World Cup finals, it was announced on Friday.

Bolivia, who failed to qualify for the finals in Japan and South Korea after finishing seventh out of ten teams in the South American qualifying group, will first play Paraguay in Asuncion on February 12.

Nine days later Carlos Trucco's side face Brazil in Rio de Janeiro, with the Brazilians hoping to do better than their 3-1 defeat by the Bolivians in a qualifying match in November.

Bolivia will then travel to Rome to face Italy on April 17.

"The Italians wanted to play against a South American team before the World Cup to help them prepare for their group match against Ecuador," said Bolivian federation spokesman Javier Silva.

Canizares stays at Valencia

AFP, Valencia

Spanish international goalkeeper Santiago Canizares has signed an extension to stay at Valencia until 2005, the club announced Friday.

The 31-year-old keeper, who has had two spells at Real Madrid, has played over 200 matches in the country's top division.

Canizares has 32 caps to his name and is well known for the changing colour of his hair which has varied from yellow to blue to green in recent years.

Bobic joins Bolton

AFP, London

English Premiership side Bolton Wanderers completed the signing of former German international striker Fredi Bobic on Friday.

The 30-year-old, who has joined on loan until the end of the season from Borussia Dortmund, has gone straight into the squad to face Chelsea on Saturday.

"I'm delighted to get a player of Bobic's quality on board for the rest of the season," said Bolton manager Sam Allardyce.

"He's a very experienced player who has spent his entire career playing at the highest level in the Bundesliga."

Bobic, capped 19 times by Germany, said: "I'm delighted to be playing for Bolton. Playing in the Premiership will be a great challenge for me and I'm looking forward too."

Real bonuses for treble

Internet, Madrid

Real Madrid chairman Florentino Perez called a meeting where he discussed with his team captains the bonus for the players.

Perez promised them 5 milliard pesetas (about 25 million dollars) if they win all three trophies - the national championship, the Royal King's Cup and the Champions League.

The decision came as a surprise as the chairman didn't mention the bonus for each of the trophies. Thus, each player will earn 200 million pesetas if the case of victory.

Adriano's high hopes

Reuters, Rome

Inter Milan's Brazilian forward Adriano has vowed to show his club what he can do while on loan at Fiorentina.

On Friday Adriano joined La Viola on loan until the end of the season but admitted he has no ambitions to join the troubled club permanently.

"My greatest hope is to be of help to Fiorentina and then return to Inter as soon as possible," Adriano was quoted as saying in Saturday's Gazzetta Dello Sport.

Adriano's move went through after Inter President Massimo Moratti agreed to loan him to Fiorentina free of charge as a favour to the struggling club.

But Adriano added: "I thank the Nerazzurri for having given me this opportunity. I can play regularly and mature enough to get used to the Italian championship. But Inter is my home and I hope to return there soon."

Adriano will be looking to follow in the footsteps of fellow Inter forward Alvaro Recoba, who proved his worth after a loan spell with Venezia.

Adriano joined Inter from Flamengo in the summer and scored the winner against Venezia earlier in the season, but has been unable to push ahead of Mohammed Kallon, Christian Vieri and Ronaldo.

He added: "I have never been to Florence but I have been told it is a beautiful city. I shall work hard to win over the hearts of the passionate Viola fans."

Anelka missed it

Football

REUTERS, London

Arsene Wenger believes his former protege Nicolas Anelka has returned to the "paradise" of the Premier League because he missed English football's love and passion.

Anelka, now on loan with Liverpool, returns to Highbury on Sunday for the first time since joining Real Madrid from Arsenal for 23 million pounds in 1999.

"I believe he has realised it was a wrong decision to leave," Wenger told reporters on Friday. "Anelka decided to go - why? That's not my problem. He was young and still is."

The volatile striker had problems settling at the Bernabeu and then at Paris St Germain whom he left last month.

"The two (clubs) he has been at have not been as positive. He was a star here, adored by everybody and especially the fans."

"He did not get that at Real Madrid or PSG...he missed that love and passion that you get in the English game," Wenger said.

"Now he has come back to English football, he realises that it is a paradise for footballers here."

"The big following, the commitment of the fans, you get it here more than anywhere in the world. Every player needs to be loved."

Wenger plucked Anelka from PSG in 1997 and, at the age of 19, he helped Arsenal win the Premier League and FA Cup double.

His goalscoring exploits earned him the move to Real, despite



NICOLAS ANELKA

Wenger's attempts to keep him in London.

But although he helped the Spanish giants to their Champions League success of 2000, Anelka moved on.

He has a reputation for being difficult to manage, and a falling-out with PSG coach Luis Fernandez precipitated his move to Anfield on loan until the end of the season.

"If he was offered to Liverpool he was offered to everyone else (in the Premier League)," said Wenger. "But I have five strikers already, and a budget, so it was never a question for me."

Wenger believes the 22-year-old could have formed a lethal partnership at Highbury with Thierry Henry, the Premier League's leading scorer this season, who was bought from Juventus to replace Anelka.

"Yes, I would still have bought Henry and they could have played together," said Wenger.

"On a daily basis, he (Anelka) was not a problem. He was an aggressive player, with great technique and we did not want him to go."

Wenger insisted the Frenchman would get a good reception from the Highbury faithful on Sunday.

"They will be quite positive," said Wenger. "They know what he did for this club."

"I have seen Nicolas a few times since he left... I spoke on the telephone when he first joined Real. I know what he is like, the critics have been harsh on him."

"Only the future will say how affected he has been. The way he bounces back will tell us more. Things can never be as easy as when you are just starting out."

Weird 2002 so far

Football

REUTERS, London

English soccer entered 2002 on a high, buoyed by the most exciting Premier League race in a decade and with the World Cup finals providing a warm background glow to counter the wintry weather.

However, headlines over the past few weeks have been dominated by the misdemeanours of players, managers and fans.

The problems have ranged from the serious - crowd violence - to the almost laughable - a fan banned for throwing a pie - but the sheer number of them has certainly dented the game's image.

Media over-reaction has not helped, with one newspaper describing a ground as a "Warzone" and another claiming that some of the crowd trouble was the worst seen for 30 years.

Such comments display a crass ignorance of the scale of the violence of the 1970s and 80s.

Nevertheless, football can do without this crop of problems that has kept the authorities busy handing out a rash of disciplinary charges to the game's top names.

The FA were also meeting with their Welsh counterparts on Friday to discuss what action to take over the violence at Sunday's FA Cup tie at Cardiff City.

Cardiff's superb 2-1 victory over premier league leaders Leeds United was overshadowed by several incidents of coin- and bottle-throwing, a post-match pitch invasion and trouble outside Ninian Park.

Cardiff's owner Sam Hammam faces possible action after he controversially walked around the pitch during the closing stages waving to the home fans and angering the Leeds supporters.

Hammam faced further criticism after it was revealed his personal bodyguard on his pitchside walk was a convicted soccer hooligan.

The FA is also investigating other incidents of bottle- and coin-throwing at the Chelsea v Tottenham Hotspur League Cup semifinal at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday.

To add to the unsavoury pile, the ruling body is awaiting reports into Thursday's division one game between Millwall and Birmingham City when a meat pie and two plastic bottles were thrown at a linesman during the 1-1 draw that saw both

managers and a player sent off.

Among the charges announced by the FA on Friday was one of improper conduct for striker Thierry Henry, likely to lead France's strike force in their World Cup defence, following Arsenal's 3-1 league defeat by Newcastle United on December 18.

The Highbury match included a red card for each side and a decisive late penalty for Newcastle, which infuriated the Arsenal players.

At the end of the game Henry charged towards referee Graham Poll, shouting and gesticulating, and he had to be restrained by team mates and members of the Arsenal bench.

Poll, English soccer's World Cup referee, was escorted off the pitch by two policemen.

Henry faces a probable one-game ban but Fulham's Barry Hayles looks set for a longer spell in the stands after being charged for violent conduct on two separate occasions -- against West Ham United and Everton.

Both Fulham and Everton have been charged with failure to control their players in the game, which featured a mass confrontation, on December 8.

Henry not sorry

Football

AFP, London

France international striker Thierry Henry said he has no regrets after being charged by the Football Association for improper conduct, the Daily Telegraph reported on Saturday.

Henry made a dramatic outburst against referee Graham Poll at the end of the English Premiership match against Newcastle at Arsenal's Highbury stadium on December 18, which The Gunners lost 3-1.

Henry had to be restrained by

Arsenal teammates and team physio Gary Lewin as he spoke with passion to Poll, who had sent off Arsenal midfielder Ray Parlour for two bookable offences when Arsenal were leading 1-0.

Poll also awarded a controversial penalty to Newcastle for Sol Campbell's challenge on Laurent Robert and the Magpies' eventual victory prevented Arsenal from going top of the table.

Henry claimed he only wanted to protest to Poll over some of his decisions during the game which saw one player from each side sent off and Newcastle awarded a controversial late penalty.

Henry told the Daily Telegraph: "Injustice makes me unhappy. If a

player kicks me, I don't react. I don't scream.

"The only time I open my mouth is if there's an injustice. I don't regret what I did at the end of the Newcastle game. I didn't swear at the ref. I didn't touch him. I didn't do anything wrong. I just wanted to ask him something."

"It looked bad because my teammates were holding me back. What is worse: to punch someone as some players have done or to try to talk to the ref as I did?"

"I have heard a lot of people saying foreign players don't care, that we come just to take the money, but I love Arsenal. I really care about the people here."

Batigol on a mission

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Roma striker Gabriel Batistuta has vowed to prove the critics wrong on his return to Serie A action after a spell on the sidelines recovering from injury.

The Argentina forward, who has been out for a month with a thigh injury, has only scored three goals this season, casting doubt on his reputation as one of the world's best forwards.

Despite leading Serie A, Roma have had to rely on captain Francesco Totti for goals with Marco Delvecchio struggling to score and Batistuta and Vincenzo Montella unfit.

"I am really ready," Batistuta was quoted as saying in Saturday's Corriere Dello Sport. "I have been out for so long and have a great desire to return. I have worked extremely hard and am physically and mentally right."

"It's been a uniquely difficult period for me and I've never been in such a difficult position. I've always had faith in myself although I've heard the critics."

"I think the fans of Roma wish me well. If there are seventy thousand fans at the stadium, it's likely that ten thousand won't be happy with me but in general I believe they have faith in me."

Roma face eighth placed Verona on Sunday and Batistuta hopes the new year will see a turnaround in his fortunes.

But he denied that his struggle for goals was due to a tactical change by Roma coach Fabio Capello, who has preferred using Batistuta as a lone striker rather than last season's twin forward formation.

"At Fiorentina I scored more than 200 goals and played up front alone or as part of a three-man attack. We're still winning games and even if this turns out to be an unfortunate year for me, the important thing is that Roma win the Championship, with or without my goals."

Advocaat on Holland list

AFP, The Hague

Dick Advocaat, director of football at Scottish club Rangers, is the main candidate to coach Holland, the country's media said on Friday.

The Dutch football federation KNVB has reportedly been in contact with Advocaat since last month and are hoping to announce his appointment by January 25.

Meanwhile Rangers chairman David Murray has said he is prepared to fight to keep Advocaat at the club.

He said: "We have no intention of letting Dick go. We have not had an approach from the Dutch and I'm not expecting one."

Louis Van Gaal announced his resignation on November 30 last year after failing to lead the country to the World Cup finals in Korea and Japan later this year.

Advocaat, who has already coached Holland from 1992 to 1995, had originally said he was not interested in returning but his stance has reportedly softened.

French First Division 'Serial Killer' strikes

REUTERS, Paris

French First Division league leaders RC Lens have streaked eight points clear in the title race after winning 1-0 at Lille in a tense northern derby.

After a clumsy and uneventful first half, Senegalese international El-Hadji Ousseynou Diouf grabbed the winner in the 57th minute, blasting the ball past Gregory Vimbey from a neatly placed cross from Daniel Moreira.

Led by in-form Australian striker Mile Sterjovski, fourth-place Lille battled back with three assaults on the goal only to be denied by Lens keeper Guillaume Warmuz.

Lille, smarting from a recent string of disappointing results, dominated for most of the final half-hour but failed to clinch an equaliser as the two rivals struggled on a semi-frozen pitch.

The match had been under threat due to icy conditions, which have claimed three of Saturday's programme.

After conceding only two defeats so far this season, Lens are now on 44 points, well ahead of Olympique Lyon, whose weekend match against Troyes is one of those postponed.

Despite bagging a place in the UEFA Cup quarter finals Lille look to have hit rocky ground, notching up two consecutive home defeats, after losing 2-1 to Sochaux before the winter break.

Friday's match was the last before Diouf and fellow key Senegalese internationals Ferdinand Coly, Pape Sarr, and Pape Bouba Diop, leave Lens for Mali and the African Nations Cup on Saturday.

Lille's inspirational coach Wahid Halilodzic, who suffered broken ribs and a punctured lung in a ski crash two weeks ago, watched his team from the sideline.

Lens' clash with trailers Metz was last week postponed due to icy weather, handing chasers Olympique Lyon the chance to slice the northerners' lead from eight to five points.

Everton seek justice

AFP, London

Everton have asked for sit-down talks with the Football Association (FA) on Friday after the English Premiership side were charged with not controlling their players.

The announcement comes only hours after the FA charged league opponents Fulham for the same offence. Both teams were involved in a mass brawl during a league match at Craven Cottage last month.

But Everton are unhappy with what they see as unfair treatment by the FA, especially regarding the expulsion of David Weir, and have asked for a personal hearing.

"We have asked the FA for a personal hearing so that we can state our case," said Everton spokesman Ian Ross.

Team manager Walter Smith chipped in: "As a club we will have to sit down and discuss the situation and our action. We felt pretty hard done by on the day and we will certainly be vigorously presenting our evidence to a tribunal."

Weir was involved in a tussle with Luis Boa Morte and the Everton man was soon given his marching orders following a second yellow card. The Fulham winger received a straight red card.