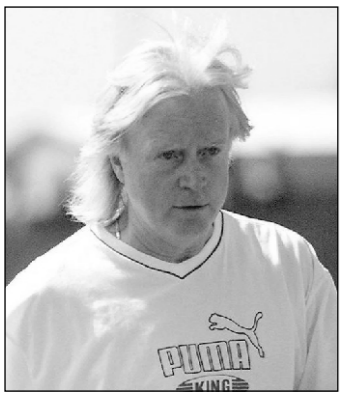


Schafer cleared, Nkono not



AFP, Bamako

Cameroon coach Winfried Schafer has been cleared to sit on the bench in Sunday's African Nations Cup final after lodging a successful appeal against his one-match ban.



WINFRIED SCHAFER

when the 'Indomitable Lions' face Senegal, tournament officials said. The one-year ban given to Nkono remains in place however.

When ordered off by police, Nkono "acted aggressively towards police officers and attempted to enter the field by force."

Eventually around a dozen riot policemen forcibly dragged Nkono from the pitch, knocking him to the floor and at one point leaving him with his tracksuit trousers around his ankles.

CAF said Saturday it was only intervention from tournament officials which prevented Nkono from being detained and formally charged with attempting to obstruct police from carrying out their duties.

"Even after that, Nkono continued to direct insults towards officials and he continued to act outrageously and provocatively towards officials and authorities," the statement added.

Nkono's arrest prompted speculation he had been trying to drop a 'magic' charm onto the pitch to help Cameroon's cause, something officials strongly denied.

The furore appeared to have had little visible effect on Cameroon's squad here Saturday who enjoyed a light-hearted training session in bright sunshine at the March 26 Stadium.

Cameroon skipper Rigobert Song said although the team had been shocked by Nkono's treatment and were annoyed by the CAF sanctions, their preparations for the final had not been disrupted.

"It's annoying - but it's not a big problem," the FC Cologne defender said.

"We are strong enough to deal with it ... tomorrow we want to continue our campaign, win the match and take the trophy back to Yaounde," Song added.

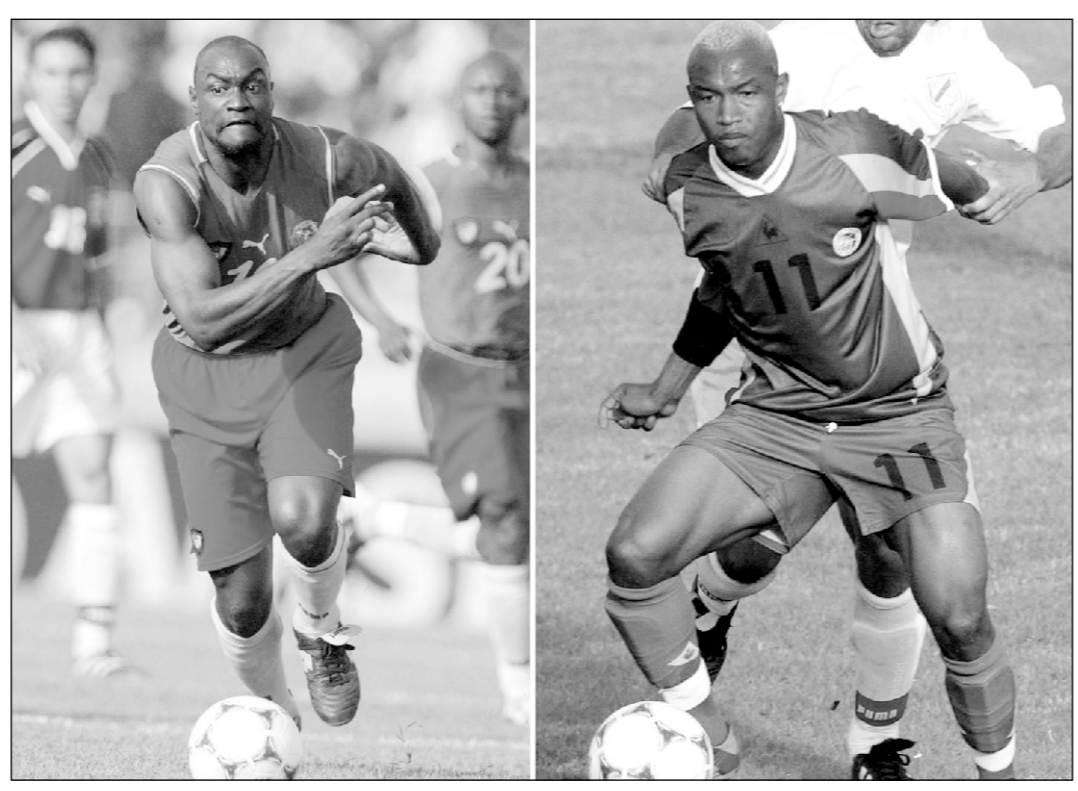
Talking about Thursday's events, Song said the team had been stunned when Nkono appeared back in the dressing room in tears shortly before kick-off.

"It gave us an extra motivation," Song said.

"We played for our trainer. When you see a coach coming into a dressing room with tears in his eyes it hurts you. He's a father, with young children.

"I was shocked and I was not the only one. What do you want us to do - we came to play sport. And if people burst into tears it upsets you."

CAF said Nkono had violated regulations by walking onto the pitch ahead of the permitted time and without proper accreditation.



HOT PROPOSITIONS: The stars to watch in the final-- (L) Cameroon's goal-machine Patrick Mboma and (R), Senegal's ace El Hadji Diouf.

Africa's battle royale today Senegal v angry 'lions'



AFP, Bamako

Nkono's remains in place. The disciplinary measures followed the furore which erupted shortly before the 'Indomitable Lions' semi-final against hosts Mali on Thursday, a match Cameroon went on to win 3-0.

After other controversies in the week, which included a row over the team hotel and a training session that got underway in near-darkness after floodlights were not turned on, Sunday's final has an added edge.

If Cameroon did not possess an 'us-against-the-world' outlook before the tournament, it is a safe bet that they do now. The question is whether they will be able to turn it to their own advantage.

Against Mali, the champions did just that. Riled by Nkono's treatment, Cameroon put on their best performance of the tournament to sweep aside the hosts with two goals from Salomon Olembe and a late effort from Marc Vivien Foe.

"The team played for the honour of Cameroon and the honour of Thomas Nkono, which had been attacked before the kick off," Schafer revealed afterwards.

Skipper and central defender Rigobert Song, who has been immense at the back throughout, was even more frank.

"What happened to Thomas made us determined to win," the Cologne and former Liverpool player said.

Meanwhile African player of the year and tournament topscorer Patrick Mboma, who missed the semi-final with a groin strain, is expected to fit for Sunday's final.

The turmoil surrounding Cameroon has inevitably deflected attention away from Senegal's advance to their first ever African Nations Cup final.

Bruno Metsu's talented side, made up almost exclusively of France-based professionals, stand on the brink of completing an extraordinary turnaround in Senegal's football fortunes.

A few years ago, the west African nation was a mere blip on the continent's footballing map.

But Metsu's arrival and a drive to draft all their Europe-based players into the national side have produced remarkable results.

Last year they qualified for their first World Cup, accounting for the scalps of powerhouses Morocco and Egypt along the way.

And at the Nations Cup in Mali last week they ended Nigeria's hopes, digging in with only 10-men to score a thrilling 2-1 extra-time victory over the Super Eagles.

In Al-Hadiji Diouf, who plays for French league leaders Lens, they have a striker regarded as one of the best in Africa, and at the back they have also looked solid, with fullback Ferdinand Coly one of the players of the tournament.

Even the mayor is embarrassed!

AFP, Milan

The Mayor of Rome has found himself in a delicate situation ahead of Sunday evening's match between AS Roma and Juventus at the Olympic Stadium.

Walter Veltroni has never made any secret of his lifelong support for Juventus and last summer was widely criticised by Juve directors when he attended Roma's victory parade after winning the title.

Veltroni, who had only just been elected as mayor of the Eternal City, turned up at the Circus Maximus, the scene of chariot races during the days of the empire, wearing a scarf in the red and yellow colours of Roma as he celebrated with a million 'Romanistas'.

Roma is the club supported by the vast majority of inhabitants of Rome - city rivals Lazio in fact have their main support base outside the city in Lazio province.

Juve coach Marcello Lippi had a dig at the mayor Saturday when he said: "You don't just change allegiance like that."

Veltroni has this year refused to say whether he will attend Sunday's match or whether he would be in the Juventus or Romanista camp.

Seaman thought about quitting

AFP, London

Veteran England goalkeeper David Seaman revealed on Saturday that he was almost forced to quit the game last year because of a shoulder injury.

The Arsenal 'keeper has been out of action since September 2001 after undergoing surgery on the troublesome shoulder following his team's European Champions League clash with Greek club Panathinaikos.

However, the 38-year-old is now close to making a first-team comeback and is dreaming of regaining his England place ahead of this summer's World Cup finals but he admits he considered retirement during his lay-off.

"The surgeons never actually told me I might have to quit but I thought about it a number of times," Seaman told the Sun newspaper.

"When the pain is there the whole time it's hard to believe it's ever going to heal. Everything I did hurt, even day-to-day jobs at home."

The Gunners veteran sustained the injury against Middlesbrough in the first game of the season. He struggled on but failed to fully recover and was forced to go under the knife after playing only nine games of the campaign.

Now Seaman is on the comeback trail and has every intention of muscling his way back ahead of Nigel Martyn and David James in time for England's opening World Cup fixture against Sweden on June 2.

Crespo's ultimatum

AFP, Rome

Lazio's Argentinian international striker Hernan Crespo has said that he will leave unless club president Sergio Cragnotti turns around the fortunes of the Italian First Division outfit, the Italian sports press reported Saturday.

Crespo, speaking to journalists at the Formello training camp, did not mince his words. "Last season we did not win the Scudetto but I tried as hard as possible to the last minute," said Crespo. "I was calm and happy. This year I am not so happy. We will see if things change otherwise I have little desire to stay here."

"I won't accept another season of failure.... Lazio know how I feel and it will move to build a great team. I hope so. But it is clear - I do not intend to give another year to Lazio for nothing."

Lazio, in eighth place and 15 points behind Serie A leaders and arch-rivals AS Roma, have been in steep decline this season. Crespo joined Lazio in the



HERNAN CRESPO

summer of 2000 when they were newly-crowned Serie A champions for a world record fee from Parma although that fee was days later surpassed when Portuguese star Luis Figo dumped Barcelona for Real Madrid.

In his first season with Lazio he was 'capocannoniere' (Serie A top goalscorer) with 26 goals in a season where the side were still in contention for the title on the last day of the season although eventually they finished third behind Roma and Juventus.

Berlusconi assurance

AFP, Milan

AC Milan have moved to reassure supporters that the club's owner and president Silvio Berlusconi, also Italy's prime minister, remains committed to the Italian First Division club, the Italian sports press reported Saturday.

With Milan enjoying their least successful spell since Berlusconi took over the club in 1986 there has been speculation that the media mogul and statesman is no longer interested in the club.

But Claudio Sposito, managing director of Berlusconi's Fininvest company, and Adriano Galliani, vice-president of AC Milan, have both assured supporters that Berlusconi remains the number one fan of the 'Rossoneri' (red and blacks).

"As far as our company is concerned the supporters must remain calm because president Berlusconi

has always said that Milan is a love affair not a business interest," said Galliani who has day-to-day control of the club although he still consults the prime minister on major decisions.

Recently it was reported that Berlusconi's son Pier Silvio might replace Galliani but that report was quickly denied.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Berlusconi turned Milan into the strongest club side in the world but they have not triumphed at European level since 1995 and at domestic level since 1999.

Berlusconi's visits to the San Siro are rare these days although last March, just after the start of the election campaign that would see him return to power, he intervened to sack coach Alberto Zaccheroni.

When Turkish coach Fatih Terim was sacked in November and replaced by Carlo Ancelotti Galliani revealed he had rung Berlusconi who had just attended a war summit of European leaders called by British prime minister Tony Blair.



SILVIO BERLUSCONI

England facing defeat!



AFP, London

England could lose out to arch-rivals Argentina next week in their preparations for their World Cup showdown this summer.

Sven-Goran Eriksson's side face their South American rivals under the roof of the Sapporo Dome in Japan on June 7 in their Group 7 encounter and both sides were hoping to gain vital indoor experience next week.

England take on Holland in

Amsterdam on Wednesday whilst Argentina visit Cardiff to play Wales in the Millennium Stadium and both sides had wanted the games played under cover.

But now the Dutch FA have said that they will only consider closing the roof at the Amsterdam Arena if the weather is bad.

"It all depends on the weather. If it's very cold or raining then it will be closed," Dutch FA spokesman Rob de Leeuw told Saturday's Sun newspaper.

"If the roof is closed when it does not need to be, the players can have breathing difficulties."

Security beefed up for Italy-USA friendly

AFP, Catania

A huge security operation has been put into effect for Wednesday's international friendly soccer match between Italy and the United States.

Achille Delio Russo, the police chief responsible for the Sicilian town in the shadow of Mount Etna, has adopted what he terms "exceptional measures of security with the massive deployment of men and means given the international situation since the September 11 terror attacks."

The United States team will be housed in a hotel outside the town on the Ionian coast.

Stam ban reduced

AFP, Rome

Lazio's Dutch defender Jaap Stam had his five-month doping ban reduced to just four months by the appeal's commission of the Italian football federation on Friday.

The lesser suspension matches the punishment handed out to Spanish international midfielder Josep Guardiola, who had been given a four-month ban in the original decision.

On Tuesday, world football's governing body FIFA decided to mirror the sanction imposed by the Italian football federation last month after both players tested positive for the banned anabolic steroid nandrolone following national league matches.

Nothing new for Eagles



AFP, Bamako

Nigeria's World Cup preparations are threatening to unravel before they even begin as an all-too familiar slanging match erupted here Friday in the wake of the 'Super Eagles' African Nations Cup exit.

Assistant coach Stephen Keshi said the squad had been demoralised by their treatment at the hands of Nigeria sports ministry officials who accompanied the team throughout the tournament.

Nigeria bowed out after a 2-1 extra-time semi-final defeat against Senegal on Thursday - and Keshi was quick to point the finger afterwards.

The former international revealed that ministry officials had

upset players by threatening not to pay promised bonuses following the quarter-final win over Ghana because the team had "played rubbish."

Keshi also said ministry officials had vowed to send home players who refused to accept a deal over airfare refunds for squad members.

Players were also upset after sports minister Ishaya Mark Aku failed to enquire about the health of Ike Shorunmu after the goalkeeper was knocked unconscious against Ghana.

Several members of Nigeria's squad lined up to fire off salvos against ministry officials here Friday.

"We don't have any trust or respect for our officials," Tijjani Babangida told AFP.

"It is not just to do with money. We hardly believe what they tell us any more because it is usually something that they go back on the next time we see them."

"What a player treasures most is to come into camp with all his entitlements worked out and paid. Nobody is asking for anything outside what we are entitled to."

Another senior player, who refused to be named, added: "Certain officials don't have the interest of the nation or even this team at heart. They were only here in Mali on holidays, nothing more."

"... they have clearly shown they don't support the coaches and they were only waiting for them to fail so that they will have an excuse to fire them."

Only coach Shaibu Amodu appeared to be willing to take a degree of personal responsibility for defeat.

"I will take full responsibility for our performance in Mali because I assembled the team. I am not making any excuses," Amodu told AFP.

"If Nigerians are not happy with us, they should kindly accept my apologies."

"It would have been great going to the World Cup as African champions. But it was not to be and it is not the end of the world."

"Everybody must have learnt from this tournament and this experience will certainly help us for the World Cup."

Amodu, the first Nigerian to qualify his country for the World Cup, now faces an uncertain future with speculation rife that he will be dumped before the Japan-South Korea extravaganza.

Nigeria are drawn in the 'Group of Death' with Argentina, England and Sweden. Officials close to the team said it is now likely that a foreign coach will be named to boss Amodu as "technical adviser" for the tournament.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across, Down, and Cryptiquip sections.

Cryptiquip puzzle grid with numbers 1-56 and letters.

CRYPTOQUIP

RLUPX K WPH WLCJOLUX JPRKEI P HJSS-OPSPBJU CJPS. YJ YPU P YLR ULI KE JPB Y YPEU.

Yesterday's Cryptiquip: IF A GHOST WERE RIDING IN AN AUTOMOBILE, I ASSUME IT WOULD FASTEN ITS SHEET BELT.

Today's Cryptiquip Clue: S equals L. 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.