

Beck crosses his fingers

REUTERS, London

England captain David Beckham is confident of being fit for the World Cup finals, according to reports in British Sunday newspapers.

Beckham's father Ted has been widely quoted as saying that the Manchester United midfielder could even be fit to play in the Champions League final on May 15 if United beat Bayer Leverkusen in the semifinals.

Beckham broke the second metatarsal bone in his foot at the beginning of the month and has been told he will need six to eight weeks to make a full recovery.

"Everything is moving in the right direction," Ted Beckham was quoted as saying in The Mail on Sunday.

"There is certainly some optimism from David that he can make the European (Champions League) final if United get through.

"People have suggested that David is a quick healer but he has never had a serious injury before. But steady progress is now being made which is encouraging."

United, who were held to a 2-2 home draw in the semifinal first leg on Wednesday, face Leverkusen in Germany on Tuesday. The World Cup in South Korea and Japan starts on 31 May.

Genk Belgian champions

REUTERS, Brussels

Genk clinched the Belgian title on Sunday for the second time in their history when they drew 0-0 at Westerlo and Club Bruges lost 5-3 at St-Truiden.

The draw moved Genk up to 71 points, four ahead of second-placed Club Beuges with one round of matches remaining.

Genk won their only previous Belgian league title in 1999.

It will be either Lyon or Lens

AFP, Paris

French league leaders Lens thrashed Guingamp 4-1 in the French First Division on Saturday night but must fight it out in next week's winner-takes-all final fixture at Lyon.

Senegal striker El-Hadji Diouf, voted African Footballer-of-the-Year just eleven days ago, twice found the net and Adama Coulibaly and Daniel Moreira got the others on a night to celebrate at the northern Felix-Bollaert Stadium.

Didier Drogha pulled one back for Guingamp in the 68th minute.

Meanwhile, Lyon beat Bordeaux 1-0 thanks to a goal by Brazilian Sonny Anderson in the 70th minute and they will earn the title next Saturday at their Stade Gerland Stadium should they beat Lens in a final-day decider.

Both teams finished the match with 10 men as Lyon's Sidney Govou was sent off in the 32nd minute and Bordeaux's Pauleta got his marching orders 17 minutes before the end.

Auxerre, who could only earn a point in a 1-1 draw at Monaco, are now ruled out of the title race and the sole aim of GUY Roux's men this season is second spot and automatic qualification into the Champions League first round.

Shabani Nonda opened the scoring for Monaco on 18 minutes and Auxerre's France international striker Djibril Cisse found the net for the Burgundy team midway through the second half.

In the standings, Lens have 64 points, a point ahead of Lyon on 63 with Auxerre third on 59, and fourth-placed PSG on 58.

Diouf, showing great confidence, put Lens ahead in the 19th minute having been sent on his way down the right flank by Coulibaly. He ran into the area and then scored from about the distance of the penalty spot with his left foot.

Philippe gets Japan ready



REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan coach Philippe Troussier says the co-hosts are "99 per cent" ready for the World Cup, despite lingering fitness concerns over key players.

The Asian champions will be without first-choice goalkeeper Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi, Ryuzo Morioka and Hiroshi Nanami when they face Slovakia in Tokyo on Monday.

But Troussier insisted that the work ethic of his players would be enough to see Japan extend a five-match unbeaten run that stretches back to a 2-0 defeat at the hands of Senegal in October.

"We have been committed to the same task for four years. At this stage the players don't even need a coach to give them instructions," the Frenchman said on Sunday.

"I said after the Italy game in November that we were ready for the World Cup. I am 99 percent sure of my squad and I am very confident."

Troussier surprisingly left Parma midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata out of the starting line-up for the 1-1 draw with Italy in Saitama.

He promised he would have another surprise up his sleeve against Slovakia, prompting speculation that he would give a rare start to Yokohama playmaker Shunsuke Nakamura.

"Wait for the team sheet tomorrow. I have every faith in this group of players," he said. "If Morioka is out, we have cover. This game gives me another chance to have a look at other options."

Morioka, who captained Japan to their second Asian Cup triumph in Lebanon in 2000, faces a race against time to recover from a hamstring injury in time for the World



PHILIPPE TROUSSIER

The finals, being staged jointly with South Korea, kick off in Seoul on May 31.

Kawaguchi, who returned from Portsmouth for the three-nation Kirin Cup despite a sore knee, could still be fit to face Honduras in Kobe on Thursday.

Nanami has been overlooked for

the Kirin Cup after failing to convince Troussier that he is back to full fitness after two knee operations in the past year.

Nakata and Feyenoord midfielder Shinji Ono are both unavailable for Japan this week due to club commitments, although Junichi Inamoto is back in contention after being released by Arsenal.

"Inamoto has got no problems with regards to his motivation but I don't know yet if he is sharp enough to last the full 90 minutes," said Troussier.

Inamoto has yet to make his premier league debut since joining Arsenal from Gamba Osaka last July.

Troussier may stick instead with Kashiwa Reysol midfielder Tomokazu Myojin, who scored a lucky opener for Japan in the 1-1 draw with Costa Rica on April 17.

Slovakia, who are not involved in the World Cup, insisted they would be no pushovers for Japan on Monday.

"We wanted to play some strong opponents to prepare for the 2004 European Championship and give some experience to our younger players," said Slovakia coach Ladislav Jurkemik.

Slovakia drew 1-1 with Belgium in Brussels on April 17. Belgium have been drawn in Group H along with Japan, Russia and Tunisia at the World Cup.

Shearer will not return

AFP, Newcastle

Former England skipper Alan Shearer has underlined his insistence that he will not be persuaded to resume his England career at the World Cup.

Shearer's 22 league goals for Newcastle have prompted many critics to suggest that with the veteran forward in vintage form England might call on his services even though he retired from England duty after Euro 96.

But Shearer, who has battled through 14 bouts of surgery in recent injury-ravaged seasons, says he will not be talked into a return.

"It's time for yours truly to have his first summer holiday since I was 20. When people talk about me playing again for England the answer is no. I couldn't do justice to both Newcastle United and my country if I tried.

"I think my decision has been vindicated by my form and goals for United," Shearer said ahead of Newcastle's final home league game Saturday against West Ham United.

Before the match, Shearer received a commemorative plaque from Newcastle chairman Freddie Shepherd for netting his 200th Premiership goal in last week's 3-0 win over Charlton.

And having secured Newcastle's passage into the Champions League with a brace at Blackburn in midweek he promptly added to his account in his side's 3-1 win over the Hammers, cancelling out Jermaine Defoe's opener.

Ferguson back with a bang

AFP, Glasgow

Rangers captain Barry Ferguson celebrated his return from injury with a second-half goal as Alex McLeish's men warmed up for next week's Scottish Cup final with a 2-0 league win over third-placed Aberdeen at Ibrox on Saturday.

Neil McCann put the home side ahead shortly before the break directly from a corner kick.

And Ferguson sealed victory by tapping home the rebound after Tore Andre Flo's shot hit the woodwork.

Motherwell provided their supporters with something to cheer about after a tumultuous week at the club with a 4-1 mauling of Kilmarnock at Rugby Park.

The crisis-torn club were placed into interim administration and put up for sale by chairman John Boyle in midweek leaving the Fir Park players fearing for their jobs.

But the team responded with an amazing show of courage for caretaker manager Terry Butcher to sink Kilmarnock with three goals in the space of a whirlwind five minutes of a dramatic second half.

Tommy Johnson had cancelled out Derek Adams' first-half opener before goals from James McFadden, Stuart Elliott and Stephen Pearson wrapped up a comfortable victory.

A late goal by Dundee substitute Steven Milne gave the Tayside team a share of the points in a 2-2 draw at Hibernian to keep up their unbeaten record this season against the Easter Road men.

Derek Townsley had opened the scoring for the home side in the 15th minute before Fabian Caballero hit back 18 minutes later.

New Scotland international Garry O'Connor looked to have secured victory for the home side before Milne grabbed the late equaliser.

Dundee Utd and St Johnstone had to settle for a point each in a dismal 0-0 draw at Tannadice.

On Sunday Scottish champions Celtic play at Hearts on Sunday and Livingston host Dunfermline.

German boss' apprehension

REUTERS, Berlin

German Football League (DFL) chairman Werner Hackmann says the country's professional clubs may lose millions in television rights and fears some of the smaller ones could go bust without the cash.

The insolvent KirchMedia group, which holds the rights to the Bundesliga until 2004 and was due to make its next quarterly instalment of 100 million euros on May 15, agreed on Friday to pay the DFL 21 million euros for the final two league programmes.

Hackmann said more talks would be held over the next few days between the DFL and KirchMedia but he doubted the full instalment would ever be paid.

"It has to be feared that that the 100 million euros instalment will not fully materialise," he told Sunday newspaper Bild am Sonntag.

The DFL, the body ruling German professional soccer, has 40 million euros in reserve from security payments made by the clubs over the past few years.

But even with that some of the rights money, which represents up to over 60 per cent of the clubs' revenue, will be missing.

Hackmann confirmed that if the top clubs would probably survive, some of the smaller ones could collapse.

"It is true that many clubs, particularly in the second division, depend largely on the television rights and are therefore threatened by insolvency," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid striker Raul Gonzalez (L) is going to shoot the ball while under pressure from Real Sociedad's Jauregui during their Primera Liga clash on Saturday.

Valencia brighten chance



AFP, Madrid

Valencia could win their first Spanish championship in 31 years next weekend, after they beat Espanyol 2-1 and their main challengers Real Madrid crashed 3-0 at Real Sociedad on Saturday.

Valencia now lead the Primera Liga table with 69 points from 36 games, with two games to play which includes a trip to Malaga next week.

Real Madrid stay in second place but are now four points adrift, although their next game is at home to struggling Real Mallorca.

However, Real Madrid coach Vicente Del Bosque admitted that they now would have to rely on Valencia faltering if they were to defend their title.

"You just have to look at the facts. Valencia now have the advantage, although things were equal in our match until they got their first goal," said Del Bosque.

Ironically, the last time Valencia won the Spanish league title they were coached by Alfredo Di Stefano, the Real Madrid legend who is now the club's honorary president.

Valencia won the hard way, going a goal down and then having to play with 10 men for nearly an hour.

"It was a tough night, I can tell you that the only time I relaxed was when the whistle went," said a relieved Valencia coach Rafa Benitez, who refused to acknowledge that the league was as good as won.

Benitez can thank his World Cup-bound Spanish international playmaker Ruben Baraja for two second half goals which resolved their problems.

Espanyol, who have only won once away this season, took the lead after 29 minutes with a Raul Tamudo penalty after Valencia defender Roberto Ayala had handled the ball.

Shortly afterwards, Valencia were reduced to 10 men when Amadeo Carboni was sent off but Baraja equalised after 67 minutes when he slotted home a pass from Kily Gonzalez, who had only been on the pitch a matter of seconds, with his left foot.

Twelve minutes later, Gonzalez again provided the service for Baraja, this time the ball being fired in with his right foot.

Real Madrid continued their habit of going down to notionally weak domestic opposition just a few days after they had risen to great heights in the European Champions League.

Two weeks ago, the defending champions lost 3-1 to relegation-threatened Osasuna immediately after beating Bayern Munich in the Champions League, and in the wake of Real's emphatic mid-week victory over Barcelona it was Real Sociedad who were supposed to be the sacrificial lambs.

However, the San Sebastian side had not read the script.

Real Madrid striker Pedro Munitis hit the post two minutes after the break but Sociedad took the lead after 57 minutes through a Darko Kovacevic penalty after Ivan Helguera had obstructed Agustin Aranzabal.

Two goals in the last six minutes from Dimitri Khokhlov and Oscar De Paula emphasised the Basques dominance and extended their home unbeaten streak to four games since coach Roberto Olabe took over last month from the sacked John Toshack.

The victory almost ensures Sociedad's survival after they have spent much of the season mired in

the relegation zone.

"One more point and then I think we can relax," commented Olabe.

Barcelona bounced back from their crushing 2-0 Champions League defeat against Real Madrid to put four second half goals in 16 minutes past Villarreal and beat them 4-1.

The Catalans still seemed hungover from their Tuesday loss and let their visitors take control during the first 45 minutes.

Villarreal striker Victor Fernandez got his 14th goal of the season after 16 minutes.

However, after the break, Barcelona got into their stride to claim a victory which moved them up to fourth.

Luis Enrique Martinez got the equaliser after 55 minutes and two minutes later Thiago Motta got his first goal for Barcelona.

After 68 minutes Patrick Kluivert finished off a move initiated deep in the midfield by Xavi Hernandez for the Dutch international striker's 17th league goal of the season.

Argentine striker Javier Saviola got his 16th of the campaign three minutes later to complete the rout and exorcise the ghosts of Villarreal's only two other league visits to the Nou Camp -- last season and in 1998 -- when they beat Barca on both occasions.

One negative note for Barcelona was a right hamstring injury to Luis Enrique, who limped off 15 minutes before the whistle.

Barcelona team doctor Ricard Pruna described the chances of the Spanish international playing in Wednesday's Champions League semi-final second leg in Real's Santiago Bernabeu stadium as, "doubtful."

"We are not going to know for a day or so but there could be problems," said Pruna.

Sepp doesn't look at loss



REUTERS, Phuket

Embattled FIFA president Sepp Blatter is confident of being re-elected to world soccer's top job next month despite the controversy that has recently dogged him.

In an exclusive interview with this news agency at a gathering of soccer officials on the island of Phuket, Blatter said he expected strong support when FIFA's 204-member associations choose between him and Confederation of African Football (CAF) president Issa Hayatou on May 29.

"When I started to announce my willingness to stand again, I had over 110 letters from associations asking me to stand," he said. "I'm sure that some of them will withdraw because they have another candidate now, but in the meantime I've had such huge support."

Asked where his votes would come from, Blatter said: "The Americas, South Africa, Europe, Asia, Oceania."

Blatter, president since 1998, is embroiled in controversy over the financial fallout from the collapse last year of FIFA's long-term marketing partner ISL-ISMM.

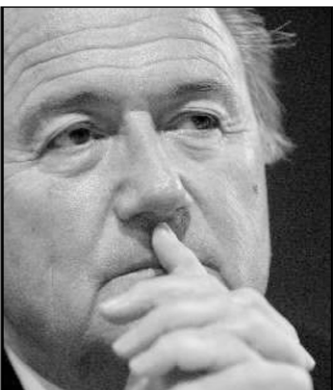
The collapse led to an internal audit of FIFA's finances, which Blatter suspended on April 11.

The FIFA president said allegations of misconduct on his part were baseless.

because it's the truth," he said. "In football you should learn to win, but also learn to lose."

Blatter dismissed the critics who said FIFA needed to be more transparent.

"More transparency than we are giving in FIFA now, it's not possible,"



SEPP BLATTER

he said. "Different national associations have gone to FIFA and had a look at the finances and they were happy."

He said he hoped to have settled the controversy over FIFA's finances by the time of the vote in Seoul next month.

"I cross fingers that I'm going to settle all these matters before the contest and then it's finished for all," he said.

Blatter said Hayatou was "a good guy", but added: "I'm not so sure this is the right time for him to be in this race for the presidency when he wasn't proposed by African national associations."

Even if Blatter loses the vote next month, he says he would remain involved in football.

"I will go on working for sports, in

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

28 Pursuit
30 — Na Na
4 Potential
syrup
7 Senate staffer
8 Soda-shop item
10 Journalist Joseph
11 Licentious revelries
13 "Keep quiet!"
16 "Little Women" woman
17 Chowder and bisque
18 Scottish river
19 Saxophonist Stan
20 Humongous (Pref.)
21 Impolite look
23 Steeple
25 Dumb-struck
26 Tumble
27 Ponderosa patriarch

DOWN

1 Without thinking
2 "—"
3 Rhythm"
4 One giving-written testimony
5 100-eyed creature of myth
6 Twosome
7 Prized assignment
8 Soviet spacecraft
9 He carries a torch
10 Lawyers' org.
12 Prolonged attack
14 Memorandum
15 Shell game
16 Need
19 Peregrinate
20 Wire measure
21 Perspire
22 Court goings-on
23 Obi
24 Glad
25 Regis' employ-
26 Looks toward
28 Intone
29 Having rows of bushes
30 Leave the herd
31 Pay attention
32 Kues' followers
34 Speaker of baseball lore
35 Frat party garb

Solution time: 26 mins.

L A V I A A M P P A I N
A G E D B O O E S T A
S T I N E H O T C I A K E S
H O T W A T E R P O W A L L
H O T S P O T C U L I A M A S
T I A R D I O E
M O N E Y H O T D I O G S
A R E B U G W O O
H O T F O O T V E N D S
L O X M A S
C R O I G I N H O T C O M B
H O T W A T E R P O W A L L
A S H I E T I R A R E I N O
P I E R S O L T R E T

CRYPTOQUIP

B G W S S P W B E Q Q S J M S M
G T S B Z Z B G H F K S I H G G K S
Z H J I T S Z , H J M J E V T S
T H W H F S S Q V B G T P S
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN MR. CLAUD TRAVELS AROUND THE WORLD ON CHRISTMAS EVE, IS IT A "SANTA CRUISE"?

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Q equals F

The Cryptoquip 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.