

Fergie let off the hook

Football

AFP, Pretoria

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson said he felt vindicated Sunday after South African justice authorities decided not to charge him with indecent assault.

The Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) rejected claims by Nadia Abrahams that the 60-year-old Scotsman had touched her inner thigh while travelling back by car to his Cape Town hotel early on Friday morning.

Ferguson, who was in South Africa along with his wife Kathy on business for United, said in a statement sent to AFP that he was glad the ordeal was over.

"I welcome the decision of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Advocate Frank Kahn not to institute a prosecution against me," he said.

"I am extremely appreciative of the swift, but no doubt thorough and decisive way in which both the South African Police Services and Advocate Kahn dealt with the matter.

"Their statement vindicates what I have said all along, namely, that I have not committed any offence and that the allegations against me are spurious and without foundation.

"I thank all those who believed in my innocence and supported me during this time."

Kahn communicated to Ferguson's legal representative Taswell Papier the official confirmation that the matter was now closed.

"A prosecution in this matter, which has wasted everybody's time, would be ridiculous. I have accordingly declined to initiate a prosecution."

Papier for his part told AFP he had persuaded Ferguson to stay on an extra day instead of flying back to England as planned on Sunday so he could return to Cape Town from Pretoria and discuss possible action against Abrahams.

"We are jubilating," Papier said.

"I expected that (the decision by the DPP). It (the accusation) was certainly groundless from the outset. I would have been very surprised if the outcome was very



I'VE GOT EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL! Sir Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager, talking on his cell phone during a visit to a soccer school in Pretoria on October 12.

different.

"The allegation from the outset had been so pathetic it was in fact a waste of everybody's time.

"Our position was: on the basis of the evidence and without even having to interview Sir Alex, there is absolutely nothing wrong.

"We have been vindicated by the DPP who has come out with a very strong statement saying it's a waste of everybody's time."

Papier said the possibility of Ferguson taking legal action against Abrahams and her boyfriend was possible but it would be up to his client.

"That is entirely up to Sir Alex," he explained.

"He would have to decide whether he would want to institute legal action against her or the boyfriend."

"There would be a very clear-cut case, but whether he would like to

go that route is entirely up to him.

"If a charge is laid, the police of course will be obliged to investigate," Papier added.

Alex Abercrombie, Ferguson's other legal representative, told AFP the Scotsman was simply relieved.

"Sir Alex is relieved, he feels his position is vindicated, the big thing to come out of that is that he wasn't questioned by the police, he didn't even have to submit a statement at all.

"Without even listening to his side of the story, they decided it was a lot of nonsense. That is very significant," he added.

Another source close to the matter told AFP the false accusation amounted to foul play by Abrahams and her boyfriend.

"It's quite clear in my view there was foul play and ulterior motives and extortion cannot be excluded," he told AFP.

"If it can be proved that there was lying under oath then there is foul play but it depends on evidence at the end of the day, and whether they (the police) are going to spend time and energy on that sort of investigation, which I doubt."

Ferguson, who has never featured on the front pages of the tabloid press in Britain regarding his private life, had strongly denied the accusations he had made advances to Abrahams after she gave him a lift back from a trendy jazz bar on Friday morning.

He denied it was his suggestion he travelled with her in the car saying Abrahams had said she could drop him back at the hotel.

Instead one of Britain's most successful ever managers had suggested she was just out to sell a story to the press - which she did in an exclusive deal with the Sunday Mirror.

Taking advantage of a break in English Premiership fixtures, Ferguson had been in South Africa since Wednesday to examine linking the giant club, the richest in world football, with academies which develop young players.

Ferguson said that despite the false allegations it would not stop him and United from forging links with South African football.

"I want to make it clear that this matter will not deter Manchester United or myself from concluding the business, which we came to South Africa for, namely, to build bridges between the South African football academies and Manchester United."

Ferguson guided Scottish club Aberdeen to the 1983 European Cup Winners Cup and Super Cup trophies and took temporary charge of Scotland at the 1986 World Cup finals after Jock Stein died of a heart attack.

Since moving to United he has landed seven Premiership titles, four FA Cup final victories, a European Cup Winners Cup and the pinnacle of his time in charge, the 1999 European Cup.

He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1999.

Guti up for the challenge

AFP, Madrid

Spanish attacking midfielder Guti, having netted his first international goal in Saturday's 3-0 Euro 2004 qualifying rout of Northern Ireland, now has a dual mission to fulfil.

Star for club as well as country. The second part of the equation is liable to prove less of a tall order than the first - thanks to the huge presence of a certain Ronaldo at Real Madrid.

Jose Maria Gutierrez, or "Guti" for short, scored in-between a Ruben Baraja brace for the Spaniards, hot tips to advance to the finals from Group 6.

And he has also been in brilliant form for Real in the opening games of the season.

He was handed - and seized upon - the chance handed him by coach Vicente Del Bosque while Ronaldo was getting match fit by netting twice in a 3-0 Champions League romp away to Roma and then netted further goals against Genk and AEK Athens.

But Real have an embarrassment of attacking riches available to them, including international teammates Raul and Fernando Morientes.

Guti, 26, is just starting to establish himself in the national side having won four caps - yet the threat of spending much of his time on the periphery at club level in the coming months is a 'Real' one.

But he was full of fighting talk after his Saturday showing.

"Now my goal is to stay at this level - and to play with Real Madrid," he insisted.

Guti got his chance at the weekend after injury to Deportivo La Coruna's Juan Carlos Valeron and Spain are gradually proving their strength in depth after repeated failures in major tournaments, including their controversial World Cup quarter-finals exit at the hands of South Korea.

According to Sunday's edition of AS newspaper Guti "has seemingly been touched by the gods since being told Real Madrid were recruiting Ronaldo."

The player himself sees Ronaldo as holding most of the aces, however.

"Ronaldo has the advantage of being Real's star signing - but I think everyone will get a chance," Guti said ahead of Saturday's encounter. "Guti turned in a fine match and scored a magnificent goal," enthused coach Inaki Saez.

"Now he has to confirm that form in coming matches and say 'here I am, and I'm here to stay.'"

But with Ronaldo, Raul and Morientes to see off the competition could hardly be fiercer.



DIVINE COMBINATION: Real Madrid superstars Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldo in a cheerful mood after Ronaldo scored a goal in his debut match last week.

Made in heaven

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid's French midfielder Zinedine Zidane believes that with the addition of Brazilian striker Ronaldo the reigning European champions have put together a footballing "dream team."

"No one would have believed it possible to construct a side like this," the former World Cup winner told Spanish sports daily Marca on Monday.

"Not even in their wildest of dreams would anyone have thought that so many good players could appear together in one team," he added.

With Ronaldo, Zidane and Luis Figo on their books, the Real squad contains five of the last six winners of

the FIFA World Player of the Year, while they can also boast of players of the calibre of Raul, Roberto Carlos and Fernando Hierro.

Zidane believes that once Ronaldo recovers full fitness the team will be almost unbeatable.

"In his first game he (Ronaldo) scored two goals and he worked well for the team in the match at Seville. I don't think we could ask for any more, but when he is fully fit we will see what a really great player he is."

"Ronaldo's arrival is good for me, for Madrid and for himself, because he has proved he got his motivation back by joining Madrid. In just 20 minutes he showed he still is 'Monsieur Ronaldo'," said Zidane.

Zidane stated that Ronaldo's signing has "increased the motivation of the Real forwards", because: "Everybody wants to be in the starting line-up, which means that you are among the best world players."

"When we are all 100 percent fit it will be very difficult to stop us."

The former Juventus player said he thought that Serie A side AC Milan would be the main threat to Real winning their tenth European Cup this season.

"Milan are the only team I can see on the same level as us in terms of great players. They have Rivaldo, (Andriy) Shevchenko, Rui Costa, (Filippo) Inzaghi, (Clarence) Seedorf... But I think we are more of a team than Milan."

The French international went on to dismiss suggestions that after winning the European Cup with Real he had fulfilled his remaining footballing ambitions.

"I am happy with what I have achieved so far," he said "But I am not going to stop now. I want to win things again with France, help Real Madrid to a tenth European Cup and win the Spanish league. I am certainly not short of ambition."

Russia smell a rat



AFP, Moscow

Russia is checking to see whether a floodlights failure that abruptly cancelled its Euro 2004 qualifier with Georgia was politically motivated, and will take "serious" measures if it was, a top sporting official said Sunday.

"We would like to believe that this was caused by technical reasons, despite the abundance of other evidence," the Russian football union's vice president, Valery Draganov, told Moscow Echo radio.

"But if this was planned in advance ... the consequences (for Georgia) will be serious."

"We have to analyze all the possible reasons for why this happened, including geopolitical ones," he said.

The match was abandoned here on Saturday after the Tbilisi Lokomotiv stadium floodlights went out shortly before half-time with the match scoreless.

The commissioner of European football's governing body UEFA

called off the match which will now be re-played in either November or early next year.

The match came against the backdrop of heated political tensions between Russia and Georgia.

The Group 10 clash was on the verge of being suspended last month amid threats from the Russian leadership that it may launch a military operation in Georgia aimed at eliminating suspected camps of guerrillas from neighboring Chechnya.

Tensions between the two countries soared after Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened to send troops into the lawless Pankisi gorge without Georgia's permission.

Putin said the region, with Georgia's blessing, is sheltering Chechen rebels as well as some masterminds of last year's attacks on the United States.

But the dispute cooled this week when Putin met Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze, who agreed to launch a joint policing operation of the two countries' mountainous border.

Georgian officials have so far flatly dismissed suggestions that politics may have been behind the stadium

lights going out.

They have also apologized for its fans' attack against the Russian team bus as it was leaving the stadium.

Georgian National Security Minister Valery Khaburzania said Sunday he has opened a criminal inquiry into the incident, saying he suspected "sabotage" was involved.

Georgian electricity minister David Mirtskhulava on his side denied any possibility of a "sabotage" saying the internal problems of the Lokomotiv stadium's electric equipment caused the problems with the floodlights.

After the UEFA commissioner ordered the game to be abandoned the local team's supporters, angered with an accident, vented their fury throwing eggs and stones at the Russian team's bus and Georgian football federation coaches.

"I'm really upset as I had to pay one third of my monthly income to attend the match," Iliko Sulkhanyan told AFP Sunday.

"I was ready to enjoy a thrilling match but who will give me my money back now?"

"It was not just an ordinary match for me and my friends," Georgian

bank officer named Gela added. "We expected that our players would prove that we are strong and are able to beat the Russians."

"But we all got another proof that Georgia is still living in the stone age and nobody should have any deal with us."

"This accident is a logical result of the existing complete disorder in Georgia," said the 28-year-old Lasha Gogokhia.

"Nobody is in charge of anything here in Georgia. And I'm confident that nobody will be penalised for the accident. As a result of this common Georgians are suffering disgrace day by day."

Georgian football federation president Merab Zhordania said that the short circuit that cut short the Euro 2004 qualifier costed his side around 300,000 dollars.

He added that the Georgian national football ruling body would also thoroughly investigate the case to prevent any possibility of a repeat incident in the future.

Super-fat Cantona!

Football

AFP, Paris

French footballing-sensation turned actor Eric Cantona has transformed himself into a waddling man-mountain for his latest film, in which he plays an obese but love-lorn police chief, the Journal du Dimanche newspaper reported Sunday.

With sagging cheeks, triple chin and elephantine girth, the athletic former Manchester United star is barely recognisable in the title role of L'Outremangeur - The Overeater - currently filming in Paris's chic 16th arrondissement.

The 36-year-old agreed to put on weight for the part, but the effect is principally the result of four hours of make-up and an enormous false stomach.

"I'm pouring with sweat," he told the newspaper.

"But the story is so touching that it was worth making a few sacrifices."

"At the start it was the idea of undertaking a metamorphosis that attracted me."

"But it was when they had to take moulds of my face and my body that I had problems. You know, I am claustrophobic. I never take the lift."

"But I am getting used to the false stomach, and things are improving all the time," he said.

Better known for his outsize personality than for his triple-XL waistline, Cantona plays 160-

kilogram Richard Selena - a police superintendent who discovers that a beautiful young woman is the murderer he is seeking.

In exchange for his silence she agrees to dine with him every evening for a year - in the course of which he falls for her charms and decides to lose weight. The story is based on a French comic-book of the same name.

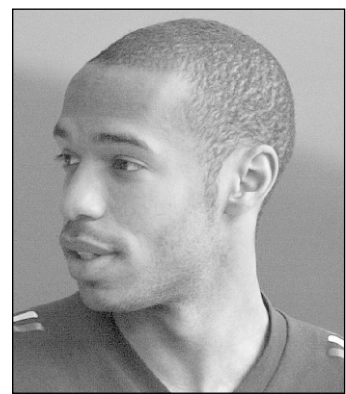
A French international who was idolised in Britain for his idiosyncratic performances at Leeds and Manchester United, Cantona suddenly left football in 1997 and metamorphosed into an actor.

His credits include "Le Bonheur est dans le Pre" - Happiness is in the Meadow - and "Les Enfants du Marais" - Children of the Marshland.



ERIC CANTONA

Play-making suits



THIERRY HENRY Henry fine

AFP, Paris

Arsenal striker Thierry Henry has been on fire for the Gunners this season - but for France he's just as happy to slip into the role of provider.

Speaking after Saturday's 5-0 demonstration in a Euro 2004 qualifier over Slovenia on the team's return to the Stade de France Henry said the whole team had proved that their poor World Cup form was behind them.

"Everyone was exemplary - the movement was extraordinary, particularly Patrick Vieira, who, as he does for Arsenal, did everything he was asked of, and more, in scoring," Henry said Sunday.

"We were determined to put on a show on our return to the Stade de France. We have quality in the squad but at the World Cup we just didn't show it on the field."

"The desire was there but physically we weren't too good. But last night both of those elements came together. When you are feeling good physically you hardly notice the effort you are putting in. It comes naturally."

Henry said he was not disappointed to have left goalscoring duties to Vieira, fellow Gunner Sylvain Wiltord, Fulham's Steve Marlet (twice) and Lyon's Sidney Govou.

"When I'm up front my first aim is not to score but provide the team with solutions."

"You mustn't be greedy. Anyway, I had a hand in setting up the two opening goals."

Coach Jacques Santini is committed to breeding a generation of youngsters alongside the likes of Henry, a veteran of France 98 and Euro 2000.

And the forward welcomes the increased competition.

"The youngsters are knocking on the door - they want to do well. Hopefully they will listen and it's up to the rest of us to set a good example."

Henry earlier missed post-match training after taking a knock on the ankle against the Slovenians.

"I caught myself on the right ankle. But I think I'll be fine to face Malta (in Valletta on Wednesday). I was able to play the whole match against Slovenia - so that's proof it's not a bad problem," explained Henry, who will fly off with his teammates Monday.

Trap couldn't care less



AFP, Rome

Coach Giovanni Trapattoni on Sunday dismissed calls by an Italian sports daily urging him to quit in the wake of Italy's disappointing 1-1 draw at home to Yugoslavia.

Sports daily Corriere dello Sport said it was time for Trapattoni to resign and make way for former boss Dino Zoff after Italy drew their second Euro 2004 qualifier in Naples on Saturday.

"Trapattoni stop! Now's the time for Zoff," the paper blasted after Italy's lacklustre display at the San Paolo stadium.

But Trapattoni, who takes his squad to Cardiff to face Group 9 opponents Wales on Wednesday, remains defiant, saying he is not unduly worried about the safety of his job.

"The ghost of Zoff? I don't lose sleep over it," he said Sunday as he prepared his squad for the journey to the Welsh capital.

"Dino is a friend of mine and I



STILL GOT THE TOUCH: Han Bong Jin, a member of the legendary North Korean 1966 World Cup squad, demonstrates his skills at a media event in Beijing on October 13. Members of the team, which famously beat mighty Italy 1-0 to knock the defending champions out from the 1966 Cup, were beginning a tour that will take them back to England to visit the site of their victory and to meet their English fans.

THE FUTURE IS FOOTBALL! Pakistan President Gen. Pervez Musharraf holds a jersey of Turkish football giants Besiktas at Inonu stadium in Istanbul on October 13 before a friendly match between Besiktas and Rapid Bucharest of Romania. Musharraf is an honorary member of Besiktas. The Pakistani leader is in Istanbul on a two-day visit to Turkey, where he will participate in a regional economic development summit.