

Italian Cup
Another battle won by Lazio

AFP, Rome

Debt-ridden Lazio held fellow financial strugglers Parma to a 1-1 draw to ease into the last four of the Italian Cup on Tuesday.

Dejan Stankovic gave Lazio a 71st minute lead with a cool finish before Australian midfielder Mark Bresciano levelled the scores for the home side with a vicious drive.

The quarter-final second leg result gave Lazio a 3-1 aggregate win having defeated Parma 2-0 in Rome last week.

Lazio, whose money problems were eased last week when shareholders backed a plan to raise 120 million euros (151 million dollars) to save the club from bankruptcy, will now meet the winners of Thursday's tie between cup holders AC Milan and Roma, a repeat of last season's final.

In need of goals, Parma started aggressively and came close to halving Lazio's advantage in the sixth minute when Matteo Ferrari's point-blank header was cleared away superbly by Matteo Sereni.

Parma, whose own future still remains in doubt following the spectacular collapse of parent company Parmalat, kept up the pressure and should have seen their positive approach rewarded on the half hour.

Brazilian wing-back Junior raced to the by-line and played the ball across goal to give his compatriot Adriano an easy chance, but the normally accurate South American striker side-footed wide of the post.

Lazio's only chance of the first half fell to Stankovic whose angled drive flashed woefully wide.

Parma were denied a clear-cut penalty in the 66th minute when Adriano, preparing to shoot for goal from inside the 18-yard box, had his shirt tugged cynically by Sinisa Mihajlovic. Fortunately for the Serbian defender, both referee and linesman missed the incident.

Lazio then rubbed salt into Parma's wounds by taking the lead five minutes later.

Claudio Lopez led a swift counter-attack and fed Stankovic, who had pulled off to his left, and the Serbian midfielder tucked home from 20 yards which flew past a helpless Sereni.

With the contest effectively over, Lazio took their foot off the pedal and were duly punished nine minutes from time.

The visitors failed to clear their lines after a Parma attack and Bresciano fired a venomous shot from 20 yards which flew past a helpless Sereni.

On Wednesday, reigning Italian champions Juventus entertain Perugia at the Delle Alpi stadium protecting a 2-1 lead, while Inter Milan host Udinese with the tie finely balanced after last week's 0-0 draw.

Inter will be looking to bounce back following Sunday's 1-0 league defeat at home to lowly Empoli which proved the last straw for Massimo Moratti, who quit as president the following day.

Houllier convinces Hamann

AFP, London

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier told midfielder Dietmar Hamann Monday he would have a new Anfield contract provided the Germany international maintained his current form.

Hamann, who has 18 months to run on his present Anfield deal was reported in Monday's edition of the Sun to be interested in a move back to Germany.

"Liverpool will be the first club I shall speak to but Stuttgart and Schalke are top addresses," the 30-year-old said.

But Houllier said talk about Hamann's future was premature. "I spoke to Didi on Monday and he has not mentioned anything of what I have read.

"But obviously if Didi performs at the level he is at the moment, we will be extremely happy to prolong his contract. At the moment, talks have not even started."

Stuttgart coach Felix Magath admitted on Sunday he sees Hamann as an ideal replacement for Croatian veteran Zvonimir Soldo who looks set to retire in the summer.

Schalke are also attracted by the prospect of snatching Hamann from Liverpool.

In the meantime, the Anfield club are set to welcome back England international Steven Gerrard back to their side for Wednesday's league game against Wolves after the midfielder was sidelined with a thigh injury.

"Stevie will play and it is good to have him back," said Houllier. "We won three of the games he missed but I always prefer to have him in my team than on the sidelines."

English League Cup

Juninho rocks Gunners



Football

AFP, London

Middlesbrough took a huge step towards the first major trophy in the club's history with a 1-0 first leg win over Arsenal in their League Cup semi-final first leg here at Highbury on Tuesday.

A 53rd-minute strike by Brazilian midfielder Juninho was enough to give Steve McClaren's side the narrowest of advantages to take into next week's second leg and their first victory against the hosts after seven successive defeats.

It was Arsenal's first domestic defeat of the season, though they will get the chance of immediate revenge this weekend as they host 'Boro in the fourth round of the FA Cup.

"We passed well and we defended well...we need to do that again on Saturday and next Wednesday," said Boro manager Steve McClaren.

"I am satisfied though we could have had some more goals.

"Obviously we are favourites being 1-0 up and due to play at home but against Arsenal you never know as whatever side they put up is always a strong one," added the former England number two.

With Arsenal still potentially on track for a potential domestic treble, the second leg fixture of this Cup could test Arsene Wenger's resolve to continue using the tournament to blood young players and give his

reserves a taste of first team action.

On the evidence of Tuesday however there was no indication of a change in policy from the Gunners boss as he admitted afterwards.

"It will be the same sort of side a mixture of experience and youth as I thought they played really well tonight and pushed till the final whistle," the Frenchman said.

Wenger as ever thought that his side had been wronged over the goal which stemmed from a terrible error by Martin Keown.

"It looked a bit suspicious. Martin could have been fouled from what I saw," he said.

Arsenal fielded only three of the players who started against Aston Villa in the Premiership on Sunday with Quincy Owusu-Abeyie handed the task of filling Thierry Henry's boots on his first start for the club.

But it was a near full-strength Middlesbrough who displayed the first signs of naivety with Arsenal's rightback, Kolo Toure, allowed to run unchecked from the half-way line to the edge of the area, from where his shot skidded narrowly wide.

Boro's Australian goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer was equally relieved minutes later when his overhit attempt to tee up a clearance came perilously close to depositing the ball at the feet of Kanu.

It was the visitors however who came closest to opening the scoring, Juninho firing against the inside of the post in the 16th min-

ute after a neat exchange of passes by George Boateng, who had started the move by dispossessing Gilberto in the centre circle.

The Brazilian's frustration was compounded by the sight of his shot rebounding straight back into the arms of Graham Stack.

Massimo Maccarone then went close with a drive deflected off Keown but Arsenal's youthful contingent showed few signs of being overawed, the confidence nurtured on the club's training ground underlined by David Bentley's audacious attempt to chip Schwarzer.

The young midfielder looked less composed as he spurned Arsenal's best chance of the opening period by lifting Kanu's cross high into the crowd at the Clock end from 12 yards out.

Wenger could put that one down to experience. However there was no such excuse for the mistake by the vastly experienced Martin Keown which led to Boro's goal.

Presented with the chance to clear his lines, Keown fatally hesitated on the edge of the area, allowing Franck Queudrue to rob him of the ball and free Gaizka Mendietta, who passed it on to Juninho and he fired a low shot from the right of the penalty area into Stack's bottom right hand corner.

"It was nice to get the goal, though I could have had more," said Juninho.

"It was nice to beat them at last and was some revenge for the 4-1 defeat we suffered earlier this month."

Figo fights for Becks

AFP, Lisbon

Portuguese international Luis Figo has defended his Real Madrid teammate David Beckham against charges the England captain moved to the Spanish champions mostly to help market the club abroad.

"About Beckham they can say he came only for marketing and he responds with moments of unique magic on the pitch," he told Portuguese sports daily A Bola.

Beckham, whose changing hairstyles, clothes and marriage



LUIS FIGO

to a former Spice Girl generate as much attention as his football skills, made a 43 million dollar (34 million euro) transfer from Manchester United, his home for 13 years, to Real Madrid in July.

The controversial move to the Spanish club, which is packed with multi-millionaire superstars, was criticized by some at the time as intended primarily to help boost sales of Real Madrid merchandise, particularly in Asia where Beckham is especially popular.

Beckham's arrival raised questions about Figo's role as both players are midfielders, but his success in slotting into a more central role than the one he filled at Manchester United has given Figo free rein on the flank.

Carlos has heard nothing

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Brazilian World Cup winning wingback Roberto Carlos on Tuesday denied he had had any contact with English Premiership side Chelsea over a potential move to Stamford Bridge.

"Chelsea have not called me. If they do I will speak with Real's chairman, Florentino Perez," he told Radio Marca.

"Perez offered me a two-year extension to my current contract through to 2007 - but I prefer to wait until the end of the season to talk about that.



ROBERTO CARLOS

"As for Chelsea, no one has called me. If they do I will speak to (Real's sporting director Jorge) Valdano and to the chairman.

"Money is not so much an issue. I want to be happy," said the 30-year-old, virtually an ever present in seven seasons with the Spanish champions with whom he has won three European titles having joined the club in 1996 from Inter Milan.

Fashionable Lions

AFP, Munich

Cameroon will defend its African Nations Cup crown in Tunisia from this weekend wearing a revolutionary one-piece kit that combines the jersey and shorts.

The predominantly green kit fastens with zips on the shoulders and features red flashes on the sides which manufacturer Puma describes as "scratches" in keeping with Cameroon's nickname of the Indomitable Lions.

It was unveiled by Cameroon coach Winfried Schafer in Munich on Tuesday and the players will wear the kit for the first time in their opening Group C match against Algeria in Sousse on Sunday.

Cameroon are seeking to go one better in the fashion stakes than in their appearance at the last Nations Cup, in Mali in 2002 when they sported sleeveless jerseys.

However the new jerseys will not go on sale to the public.

Techno goalie!



Football

AFP, Brussels

Genk goalkeeper Jan Moons used an earpiece to receive tactical information for the first time in the history of football in Genk's 1-0 Belgian league victory over FC Bruges last week.

Football's world governing body FIFA said they could not comment on its use until they had been informed of this experiment by the Belgian football federation (URBSFA) however article 4 of the game's laws only says a player's equipment must not put in danger his own security or that of others.

Genk have decided to repeat the test believing the pioneering use of the gadget in football, though it has been used for some time in other sports such as cycling, American football and motorsport, to have been a success.

Moons said: "Before we used the earpiece, the orders of the coach used to arrive about five minutes late because of the noise of the stadium. However on Friday against Bruges, we were instantly able to rejig our defence when the coach realized our opponents were using a lone striker.

"The information got to me instantly and I was able to quickly reposition my defenders."

Belgian national coach Aime Anthuenis has described the earpiece, made by a Flemish company, as a revolutionary discovery, though Alain Courtois, a director of Euro 2000 and a former general secretary of the URBSFA, said it was ridiculous.

The Belgian football federation confirmed there was nothing in the laws which forbid the use of such a gagged but were disappointed Genk had not consulted them beforehand.

Anthuenis said of the innovation: "This will bring about a real revolution in the world of foot-

ball. If FIFA authorize it, I will definitely use it." Belgium's next match is against France on February 18 in Brussels.

Genk's Dutch coach Sef Vergoossen said: "At Genk, we started with the goalkeeper because he is the most available player to hear information without being distracted from his task, and also the best positioned.

"But I will extend its use to certain outfield players."

Courtois believed its use was ridiculous, claiming that on a football pitch, success should be left to the human factor without the aid of technology. This view on technology is in line with FIFA which has always been against the use of video playbacks in the sport.

Should the system become mainstream, it would no doubt create a whole new battle field with the use of scanners to intercept messages, as used in motorsport, which could transform a match into a technological chess game.

Rijkaard feels near to Real!



Football

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona's embattled coach Frank Rijkaard said on Tuesday his club are not vastly inferior to league pace-setters Valencia and Real Madrid, even if they clearly must improve on their current seventh place.

With just seven wins in their 20 league outings Barca have 16 points to make up on leaders Valencia, who lead Real by a point.

But Rijkaard insists his project to get rid of what he believes has become a culture of failure is increasingly coming on track.

"If we can break this tendency and see that we can get right up there I think the difference (with the leading pair) will prove not so

great," Rijkaard insisted.

The pressure on the Catalan club is huge with Real having largely ruled the roost since Barca captured their last league title in 1999 under predecessor Louis Van Gaal.

But they have never looked like returning to the dominant force they were under another Dutchman Johan Cruyff, who won the club their only European Cup in 1992 as well as four straight league crowns from 1991 to 1994.

"We can't ask for patience from the Barca fans but I think most people recognise we are taking a new direction and turning things around," Rijkaard told reporters.

"I knew it would be difficult from the start - there are several players in the squad who have been here for years and the people have this feeling of having won

nothing for three or four years.

"Barca are obliged to win things but I knew this (feeling) would weigh heavily on the team and knew I would have to change things little by little.

"We have to change this mentality and we are working on this every day," Rijkaard explained.

He added he was looking to bring "some top drawer" players to the club to join the likes of Brazilian world champion Ronaldinho for next season, without mentioning who his favoured targets were.

Rijkaard, in his first season in charge at the Nou Camp, added he would not make any moves in the transfer market until the summer even as Barca struggle to chase a Champions League place, having already missed that usually minimum target last season.

Saha through medical



Football

AFP, London

Louis Saha has passed his medical with Manchester United and should complete his move from Fulham by the end of this week, Sky Sports reported on Tuesday.

The 25-year-old French forward is set to move for a fee of around 12 million pounds but the move is unlikely to be completed until United manager Sir Alex Ferguson returns from Dubai, where his side are enjoying a brief break, on Friday.

However, Saha is ineligible for United's next match, an FA Cup fourth round tie away to third division Northampton Town on Sunday.

Fulham signed United States

international striker Brian McBride from Major League Soccer side Columbus Crew on a two-and-a-half year deal Tuesday.

Fulham manager Chris Coleman insisted his side could survive the loss of Saha, who has scored 15 goals this season.

On Monday, Saha was left out of the Fulham team that lost 3-1 away to Newcastle. But former Fulham

defender Coleman said the London club were not a one-man team.

"As the manager, I have got to make sure I prepare my players for a tough second half of the season, which it is going to be.

"I have got a great bunch of lads in there, they have been magnificent so far this season," said Coleman of a Fulham team that despite Monday's defeat are still an impressive seventh in the

Premiership.

"They proved a lot of people wrong, because at the start of the season, I wasn't even going to be in a job by now according to some people, we were going to be bottom of the league.

"But there are 16 games left and they are going to be big games. There is a lot of points to play for and we are only nine points off that safety, I think, 40 points, which was my desired outcome at the start of the season, 40 points, we are safe and we can march on.

"We have got 31 points, we are in a good position, we are not going to get carried away with the events, obviously with Louis going.

"We are not going to make excuses, otherwise that suggests we are a one-man team, and we are not a one-man team - but we need to prove that."

They have another agenda



AFP, Tunis

South Africa and Morocco are set to transform their African Nations Cup campaign into one last desperate battle to win the prize of hosting the 2010 World Cup finals.

Tunisia, Libya and Egypt are also involved in the race to win the right to stage the event for the first time on African soil, but it is the tried and tested experience of South Africa and the emotional pull of Morocco's previous three failed bids which are being widely tipped to go down to the wire when world governing body FIFA makes its choice on May 15 in Zurich.

South Africa were considered to be the runaway favourites until recently but Morocco are understood to be winning backers at the same time that outsiders Tunisia, Libya and Egypt are under strong pressure to unite behind one North African bid.

Adding further spice to the rivalry is that both sides have

been drawn in the Group D of the African Nations Cup which gets underway here on Saturday and face each other in Sousse on February 4.

"It does not matter if there were ten countries against us," said Danny Jordaan, the chief executive of the South African bid, recently.

"For FIFA, one country had to win and this country had to be African. Our aim is simple and that is to get 13 out of the 24 votes on the FIFA executive committee."

Some observers are predicting that just a single vote may decide the winner.

Jordaan has tried to impress upon the world governing body that South Africa has both the experience and track record to succeed.

"FIFA will name the winning country in the year that coincides with the 10th anniversary of full democracy in my country," he said.

"I have no doubt that South Africa is the best bet for the African continent."

The Confederation of African

Football (CAF) is desperately trying to cut a neutral path.

"For us at CAF, the most important thing is that the World Cup in 2010 will take place in Africa for the very first time," said CAF spokesman Sulaiman Habuba.

"It is therefore now left to the individual countries to convince the 24-member FIFA executive committee that they have what it takes to play host to the world."

Morocco tried and failed to host the 1994, 1998 and 2006 World Cup while South Africa, who lost their 2006 bid by one vote to Germany, can boast successful organisation of the rugby and cricket World Cups in 1995 and 2003 respectively.

Meanwhile, Tunisia is determined to use the Nations Cup as a shop window for their bid.

"Approaching the 2010 dossier with a perfect organisation in 2004 will give a huge boost to our chances," said chief tournament organiser Slim Chiboub Chiboub.

"It would add weight to the joint Tunisia-Libya bid for the 2010 World Cup. We can show that Tunisia is already capable of organising a continental competition."