

Mutu tries to win hearts

Football

AFP, Bucharest

Former Chelsea striker Adrian Mutu, who has been suspended for seven months by the Football Association following a recent drugs scandal, turned his attention to fans in his native Romania here Tuesday.

"There's no justification for what I've done. I want to apologise to all the supporters of the national team," the Romanian international told reporters at a press conference. Mutu tested positive for cocaine, although he later denied it was the drug involved and instead explained he had taken a substance to improve his sex life.

The 25-year-old Romania captain's future is uncertain following his sacking by Chelsea and his FA ban, but he has tried to send out a clear message of his intentions.

"What the fans have to remember is that I'm not a role model. I was

far from living the life of a professional athlete and I'm the only one who's to blame for what has happened.

"I'm dependent on football, not on drugs," affirmed Mutu, who said he was ready to undergo any drugs test in the future.

He added: "According to the English FA, I will have to have a test once a month."

While Mutu's club career could relatively easily kick off again, his international outlook is still unclear.

Mutu has already taken a step towards getting back to playing and said he will start training immediately with Romanian first division side Dynamo Bucharest.

"It's where I started my career, so it's like a second home to me," he explained. "I'm going to do what I can during my suspension to get back to full fitness."

Mutu also made a plea to the Romanian media, who up until his sorry episode had held him aloft. "The critiques coming my way

over the past few weeks have all been justified, but all I ask is for you not to judge me. I'm not here on trial."

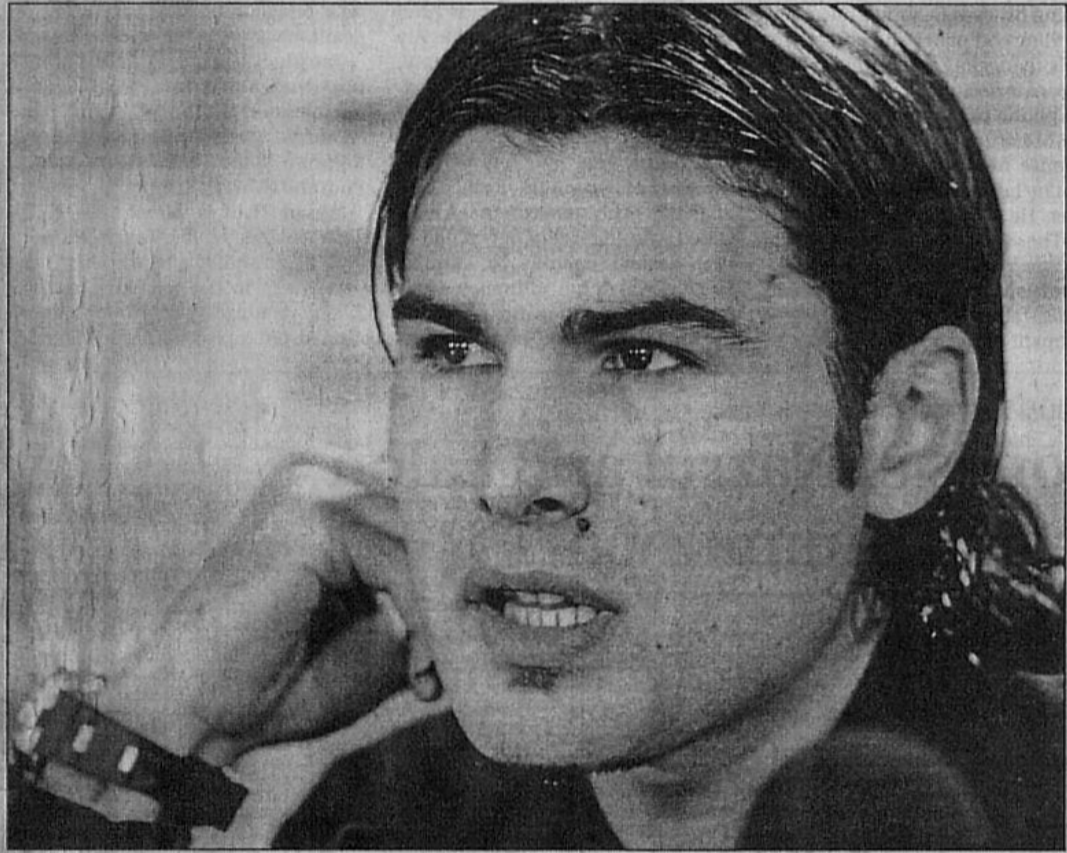
Mutu said he would turn down an offer to become an assistant coach for the Romanian national team.

Though he said he would not become an assistant coach, Mutu said he would remain close to the Romanian squad and accompany it to the next World Cup qualifier in Yerevan, Armenia.

Mutu was captain of the national team, scoring key goals against Finland and Macedonia and helping Romania to the top of Group 1 in World Cup qualifiers.

Chelsea terminated Mutu's contract on the grounds of "gross misconduct," as part of their "zero-tolerance" drugs policy.

He was also fined 20,000 pounds by the FA's disciplinary committee who said his suspension would be subject to him completing a "programme of education and rehabilitation."



Disgraced Romanian star Adrian Mutu speaks during a press conference in Bucharest on November 9.

Hands off Adriano!

INTERNET SOURCE, Milan

Inter have told Real Madrid to forget about any attempts to sign Nerazzurri sensation Adriano.

"He is the present and the future of our team," stated technical director Marco Branca. "Adriano will remain a dream for Real Madrid."

The Italian made that statement after the Spanish giants admitted that they were keeping an eye on the striker.

Despite being heavily linked with Roma's Antonio Cassano, it seems that the Brazilian is their primary target.

"Adriano is the player who we are being most attracted to at the moment," stated President Florentino Perez.

"I don't want to offend any other players in the Italian league but Adriano is the best there is. He is very young and will undoubtedly win the Golden Ball in the future."

This is not the first time that the Madrid giants have turned to Inter in a bid to reinforce their own squad.

The European giants famously signed both Roberto Carlos and then Ronaldo also Brazilians from the San Siro outfit in recent history.

Owen the reason for Camacho's quitting

REUTERS, Madrid

Former Real Madrid coach Jose Antonio Camacho says the signing of England striker Michael Owen had contributed to his decision to quit in September.

Camacho, who resigned after just four months in the post, told sports daily Marca on Wednesday that he had been unhappy at not being able to exert full control at the club.

"I didn't ask for Owen, although I said that I would not get in the way. Xabi Alonso was an option, but the priorities were (Arsenal's) Vieira and (then AS Roma player) Emerson," said Camacho.

"When I am coaching I want to organise things, and here (at Real Madrid) I could not do that as I would have liked and so I decided to leave."

Among the proposals Real Madrid turned down was for players to eat lunch at the training ground so they could work in the afternoon, he said.

Former Liverpool frontman Owen, who joined the club's "galacticos" in August, has scored five goals in six games after struggling to make an impact in his early weeks in the Spanish capital.

Real's stuttering start to the season was another factor in Camacho walking away, saying he was incapable of getting the most out of an expensively assembled squad.

Camacho, who also had a 23-day spell as Real coach in 1998, says that he is unlikely to get another chance at the Bernabeu.

"I don't think I will have a third opportunity to train Real Madrid," he said.

Robson takes over West Brom

AFP, London

Former England captain Bryan Robson was on Tuesday officially unveiled as the new manager of West Bromwich Albion.

And Robson, who signed a 12-month rolling contract, said: "It is great to be back."

Former Middlesbrough and Sheffield Wednesday defender Nigel Pearson has been appointed assistant manager after leaving his post as England under-20 coach.

Robson, who won 90 England caps including 65 as captain, began his playing career with Albion and scored 46 goals in 249 games before joining Manchester United for 1.5 million pounds in 1981.

Now the 47-year-old is back to try to revive the fortunes of the club who are currently 17th in the Premiership and facing a battle to retain their top-flight status following the departure of previous manager Gary Megson.

"I am just delighted to be back involved with Albion," said Robson. "After all these years, it is great to return to the club when it has got a sound structure."

"The feedback I have had is that the fans have been right behind me to get this position and I just hope we can get off to a good start to boost everyone's confidence."

"The main aim of everybody at the football club has to be working hard together so the fans will be watching Premiership football again next season. It is a great challenge for Nigel and I."

Robson's first match in charge will be on Sunday at home to Boro, the club where he spent seven years as manager after ending his playing career. Pearson was Middlesbrough captain during Robson's reign at the Riverside Stadium.

He said: "It was a very difficult decision to leave the FA where I had some wonderful years. Working with the best young players in the country has been a fantastic experience."

"But joining West Brom was an opportunity that I could not refuse and I am very excited about the role."

It's anyone's for the taking

Football

AP, Paris

The race for this year's prestigious Golden Ball trophy is wide open with Manchester United's Ruud van Nistelrooy battling a host of Brazilian stars and new face Wayne Rooney to be named European player of the year in the award presented by France Football magazine.

Van Nistelrooy has had a stellar year for club and country but the Dutchman is up against the mercurial Ronaldinho, who has shone brightly for Barcelona.

Ronaldinho joined fellow Brazilians Adriano, Aliton, Emerson, Juninho, Kaka and Ronaldo on a shortlist of 50 nominees announced Tuesday, which also includes last year's winner, Pavel Nedved.

The skillful Juventus midfielder marked 2003 with a series of inspirational displays for Juventus and the Czech Republic. But this year, Nedved has been outshone by the likes of Ronaldinho, Portugal midfielder Deco and prolific AC Milan marksman Andrei Shevchenko.

One significant newcomer is van Nistelrooy's Manchester United teammate Wayne Rooney of England. The stocky 19-year-old striker thrilled English fans at Euro 2004, scoring four goals and running defenses ragged before an ankle injury led him to limp off early in the quarterfinal defeat to host Portugal.

The Golden Ball is a benchmark in soccer dating back to the first award in 1956, when Englishman Stanley Matthews won.

The winner will be selected next month in the magazine's annual poll of selected journalists from around the world.

Nedved clinched the trophy with 190 points last year, ahead of Thierry Henry with 128 and Paolo Maldini with 123. Arsenal striker Henry and veteran AC Milan defender Maldini are nominated again this time around.

Deco, 27, starred for club side FC Porto as coach Jose Mourinho -- now with Chelsea -- led the side to Champions League success and the Portuguese title. He also inspired Portugal to reach the Euro 2004 final, where it lost 1-0 to Greece.

When Ronaldinho, 24, joined Barcelona, the club was dispirited, chaotic and languishing far from the summit of the Spanish top flight. Now, the Catalan club is riding high at the top of La Liga and putting in some strong showings in the early rounds of the Champions League.

English League Cup

Jol-ly good start

Football

AFP, London

Spurs new manager Martin Jol got off to a winning start on Tuesday as they beat Championship side Burnley 3-0 in their League Cup fourth round clash.

Ireland international Robbie Keane notched a double and England striker Jermain Defoe added a third to see them safely through to the fifth round in a competition that is the last trophy they won back in 1999.

Their north London rivals Arsenal got their first win in five matches as a second string side beat Premiership rivals Everton 3-1 with Arturo Lupoli scoring a double after the Liverpool-based outfit had gone ahead in the eighth minute.

However there was more pain for Premiership strugglers Southampton as they were humiliated 5-2 by Championship side Watford and it was doubled as their bitter south coast rivals Portsmouth eased through 2-0 over another Championship side Cardiff.

Keane eased Spurs nerves after a scoreless half-an-hour as he shot home from a fine cross by midfielder Michael Carrick, who former boss Jacques Santini had refused to play during his brief and undistinguished time in power which ended in his surprise resignation last Friday.

Jol was especially happy that Carrick had made an immediate impact and his comments left little to the imagination as to who had been responsible for the midfielder's misery.

"I am delighted for him as I thought when he came here he would be the fourth England international at the club," said the Dutchman.

"He has had a difficult time since he came here but hopefully he will come on stronger for this," said Jol, who made his name at unheralded Dutch sides RKC Waalwijk, Den Haag and Roda JC Kerkrade winning Dutch coach of the year honours twice.

Keane then virtually wrapped up the clash seven minutes into the second-half as he tapped in after impressive work by Defoe and then the Irishman returned the favour as his neat flicked on header reached his strike partner and he curled the ball into the net.

Jol said that he hadn't been happy with the first-half perfor-

This turnaround in fortunes is largely due to the dazzling skills and scoring ability of Ronaldinho who only recently scored another sensational goal as Barcelona downed AC Milan 2-1 in a Champions League group match.

Shevchenko is a regular fixture at the top of the Italian scoring charts, and is also nothing freely for Europe and for Ukraine, for whom he has 24 goals in 56 matches.

He helped AC Milan win Serie A last season and finished as top scorer in the Italian league with 24 goals, including just one penalty.

Shevchenko, 28, is lethal inside the penalty area, good in the air, difficult to mark and can also strike from impromptu angles and from long range. In short, a defender's nightmare.

Several players from the triumphant Greece side are included on the list, notably goalscorer hero Angelos Charisteas, the Werder Bremen striker who scored the decider in the final.

Another notable nominee is England midfielder Frank Lampard, a rising star of English soccer with Chelsea and the national team.

Lampard was England's best midfielder at Euro 2004, chipping in with three goals and outshining captain David Beckham. Only Rooney managed to eclipse Lampard's showing at Euro 2004.

However, there is no place on the list for 2002 contender Roberto Carlos of Brazil, once considered the world's best attacking fullback, or Michael Owen, his teammate at Real Madrid.

FULL LIST	
Adriano (Inter-nazionale), Aliton (Schalke 04), Ayala (Valencia), Baraja (Valencia), Baros (Liverpool), Barthez (Marseille), Beckham (Real Madrid), Buffon (Juventus), Cech (Chelsea), Harsteas (Werder Bremen), Deco (Barcelona), Delas (AS Roma), Droghda (Chelsea), Emerson (Juventus), Eto'o (Barcelona), Figo (Real Madrid), Giuly (Barcelona), Henry (Arsenal), Ibrahimovic (Juventus), Juninho (Lyon), Kaka (Milan), Kapsis (Bordeaux), Lampard (Chelsea), Larsson (Barcelona), Maldini (Milan), Maniche (Porto), Micoud (Werder Bremen), Mista (Valencia), Morientes (Real Madrid), Nedved (Juventus), Nesta (Milan), Nikopolidis (Olympiakos), Pirlo (Milan), Reyes (Arsenal), Carvalho (Chelsea), Ronaldinho (Barcelona), Ronaldo (Real Madrid), Ronaldo (Manchester United), Rooney (Manchester United), Rosicky (Borussia Dortmund), Scholtes (Manchester United), Seedorf (Milan), Seitaridis (Porto), Shevchenko (Milan), Totti (AS Roma), Van Nistelrooy (Manchester United), Vicente (Valencia), Vieira (Arsenal), Zagorakis (Bologna), Zidane (Real Madrid).	

Rowdy ball boys

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Former South American champions Gremio have been hit with their second home ban in less than two weeks, this time after one of their ball boys was involved in an incident with a rival goalkeeper.

Gremio, who appear doomed to second division football next year, were given a two-match ban after the youth kicked a ball straight at international keeper Clemer during last month's "Gre-nal" derby at the Olimpico stadium in Porto Alegre.

Gremio supporters also threw objects on to the field and one supporter ran on to the pitch during international's 3-1 win.

The club, formerly managed by Brazil's 2002 World Cup winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari in the mid-1990s, are bottom of the Brazilian championship with 35 points from 40 games.

The bottom four in the 24-team table go down and Gremio are nine points adrift of 20th-placed Parana with six matches left.

They will now have to play their home matches against leaders Atletico Paranaense and Ponte Preta at less than 150 kilometres from Porto Alegre.

Gremio could face further punishment after their fans hurled objects on to the field during the match against Palmeiras 10 days ago, in which they were serving their first ban.

That game was played in the town of Pelotas after tennis shoes were hurled on to the field during an earlier Gremio match.

Close shave for Rooney

AFP, London

England teenage striker Wayne Rooney was unhurt after his car was involved in a collision with a 23-ton builder's lorry.

The 19-year-old Manchester United front man was able to continue driving to training after his 4x4 Cadillac Escalade was damaged in the collision in Wilmslow, northern England on Tuesday.

A spokesman for Rooney told Wednesday's The Sun: "We can confirm Wayne was involved in a collision."

Meanwhile, Rooney's agent, Paul Stretford, has escaped prosecution for lying to a court over his signing of the teenager star.

Stretford had accused three men linked to Rooney's former agent of attempting to intimidate him into handing over a percentage of the player's future earnings.

But the case against the three men collapsed when it became clear that Stretford had misled the court over when he began representing Rooney.

Local police investigated the circumstances surrounding the collapse of the trial but announced on Wednesday that they would not be taking it any further.

Stretford resigned as a director of the Formation Group of agents shortly after the trial but still heads its professional representation division.

Becks to be back soon

REUTERS, Madrid

David Beckham should be fit to return to action for Real Madrid this weekend after a month out with a rib injury, the club said on their website on Wednesday.

The England captain took part in a full training session on Tuesday for the first time since fracturing his ribs playing for England in a World Cup qualifier against Wales last month.

Robinho pleads for peace

Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian footballer Robinho appealed for his family to be left in peace as he spoke in public for the first time since his mother was kidnapped on Saturday.

"You're outside my house all the time and this is getting in the way," the 20-year-old Santos forward, regarded as one of the best Brazilian players still based in his homeland, told a news conference at the club on Tuesday.

"I hope this all finishes well and that I can go back to playing football again."

Television crews and reporters have been camped outside the apartment of Robinho's family since Sunday.

"A lot of things have been published which aren't true," added Robinho. "It's time to be calm and I ask you to leave me in peace. I hope you have some comprehension for me and my family."

Police said 43-year-old Marina de Souza was abducted by two armed men who invaded a barbecue at a house in the Santos neighbourhood of Praia Grande.

On Monday, police said they would not give any more details about the case.

Robinho, 20, is regarded as one of Brazil's finest prospects after helping Santos win the domestic championship in 2002.

The kidnapping came at a time when speculation is rife about a possible transfer abroad, with Spanish clubs Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid and Portugal's Benfica among the possible buyers.

Meanwhile, the footballer's club Santos said Robinho will not be leaving for Europe until at least July next year.

Santos president Marcelo Teixeira said on Tuesday that no transfer agreement had been signed with any club for his star player, who is descended from slaves from the north east of Brazil and is valued at an estimated 14 million pounds.

"I can assure you that Robinho will not be leaving till before July 2005," he said.

"All I can say is that no pre-contract has been signed with PSV Eindhoven, Benfica, Real Madrid or any other club interested in buying him."

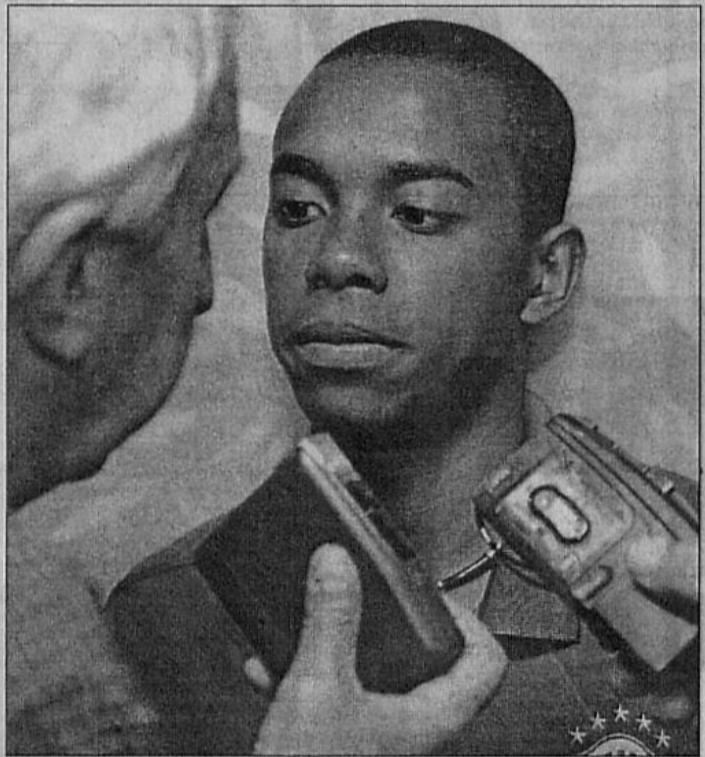
Teixeira admitted he had received a call from Real Madrid president Florentino Perez.

"We told him that we did not want to sell Robinho for the moment," he said.

Robinho has won two caps for Brazil, although many commentators believe he deserves more chances.

Santos are second in the Brazilian championship with six rounds of matches remaining and Robinho is their leading scorer with 21 goals.

He missed Sunday's match at Criciuma and will also be left out of Wednesday's Copa Sudamericana game at home to Ecuadorian champions Liga de Quito unless the case is resolved by then.



ROBINHO

South America to change

Football

REUTERS, Caracas

FIFA president Sepp Blatter has confirmed that South America must change its marathon World Cup qualifying tournament in which the 10 nations play each other twice.

"This is the last time FIFA accepts this system because there's no space in the co-ordinated international calendar," Blatter told reporters during a two-day visit to Venezuela.

"With this system, we have

problems getting the players released by their clubs," he said. "The players get tired...and in my opinion it doesn't help in the development of world football," he said.

The South American Football Confederation (CSF) is using the system for the third time, although only nine teams took part in the qualifiers for the 1998 World Cup when Brazil were guaranteed a place as holders.

This time, the competition has been spread out over more than two years to allow time to fit in all the games.

The top four teams in the group qualify directly for Germany and the fifth will play off against the winners of the Oceania region.

World champions Brazil, no longer guaranteed an automatic place under new rules, lead the group with 20 points from 10 games.

Blatter's announcement came less than one month after the CSF said it was planning to change the system of their own accord.

The CSF's executive committee is due to meet in Asuncion on December 2, when it is expected to discuss the issue.