

Happy Birthday Jose!

REUTERS, Manchester

Chelsea gave manager Jose Mourinho a perfect birthday present on Wednesday with their 2-1 victory over Manchester United that sealed their Portuguese manager a place in his first major English soccer showpiece.

Mourinho, 42 on Wednesday, beamed with pride after Damien Duff's fortunate 85th-minute winner at Old Trafford set up a date with Liverpool in the League Cup final in Cardiff on February 27.

"It's a perfect birthday," Mourinho told reporters. "The feeling is fantastic. It's great to be in the final."

"Everybody in our group was talking about it being my birthday gift but it's not my birthday gift, it's a gift for every player, the supporters and it's a gift for (Chelsea's Russian billionaire owner) Roman (Abramovich)."

"He has given a lot to the club and this is the first time he's got the real good feeling of being in a final. So I prefer to share with all of them. It's a great feeling."

Mourinho revealed that Abramovich might have a dry-cleaning bill to address after venturing into the Chelsea dressing room after the game to join in the post-match celebrations.

"He is very happy but I think he shouldn't go into the dressing room again because he went in there and was showered with champagne," Mourinho grinned. "Next time he should think twice."

United manager Alex Ferguson was left to stomach the first domestic semi-final defeat of his 18-year reign at Old Trafford - it was also the club's first such defeat since 1975.

"I don't enjoy it. I'm a bit disappointed with that," the Scot told television reporters.

Ferguson was upset that none of his defenders attacked Duff's tantalising free kick, which eluded everybody and bounced into the top corner of the goal.

"It was a bit soft. They scored with a free kick from about 50 yards out so I'm not happy about that," he added. "You can't win games if you concede goals like that."

He also complained that United had two first-half penalty appeals turned down.

"I'm fed up with talking about penalties being turned down," Ferguson said. "In the first leg we should have had a penalty kick and tonight we should have had a penalty kick."

"But we played exceptionally well in the second half. It was a great game. We went for it. I thought we had by far the bigger momentum in the second half and played some great football."

Ferguson at least had something with which to drown his sorrows.

Mourinho said that, as promised, he had left the United boss a bottle of fine Portuguese wine, reportedly worth over 250 pounds (\$470), to enjoy after the game.

Given the nature of the loss, Ferguson might have preferred something a little stronger.

FA's shame

AFP, London

English football chiefs have been forced to apologise for failing to include any black players in an official DVD of England's greatest post-war internationals.

The DVD, entitled 'The Pride of the Nation', has been included in a welcome pack for newcomers to the 'englandfans' official members' club.

The initial list given to video producers Octagon was understood to have included black players but none of them made the final cut when the running time was reduced to 30 minutes.

Many of the remaining 17 players are not controversial choices, including Bobby Moore, Gary Lineker, Sir Bobby Charlton, Paul Gascoigne, Alan Shearer, Bryan Robson, David Beckham and Terry Butcher.

However, Martin Peters, Chris Waddle, Stuart Pearce and Steven Gerrard were also included, while black players such as Rio Ferdinand, Sol Campbell, Paul Ince, John Barnes, Ashley Cole and Viv Anderson were overlooked.

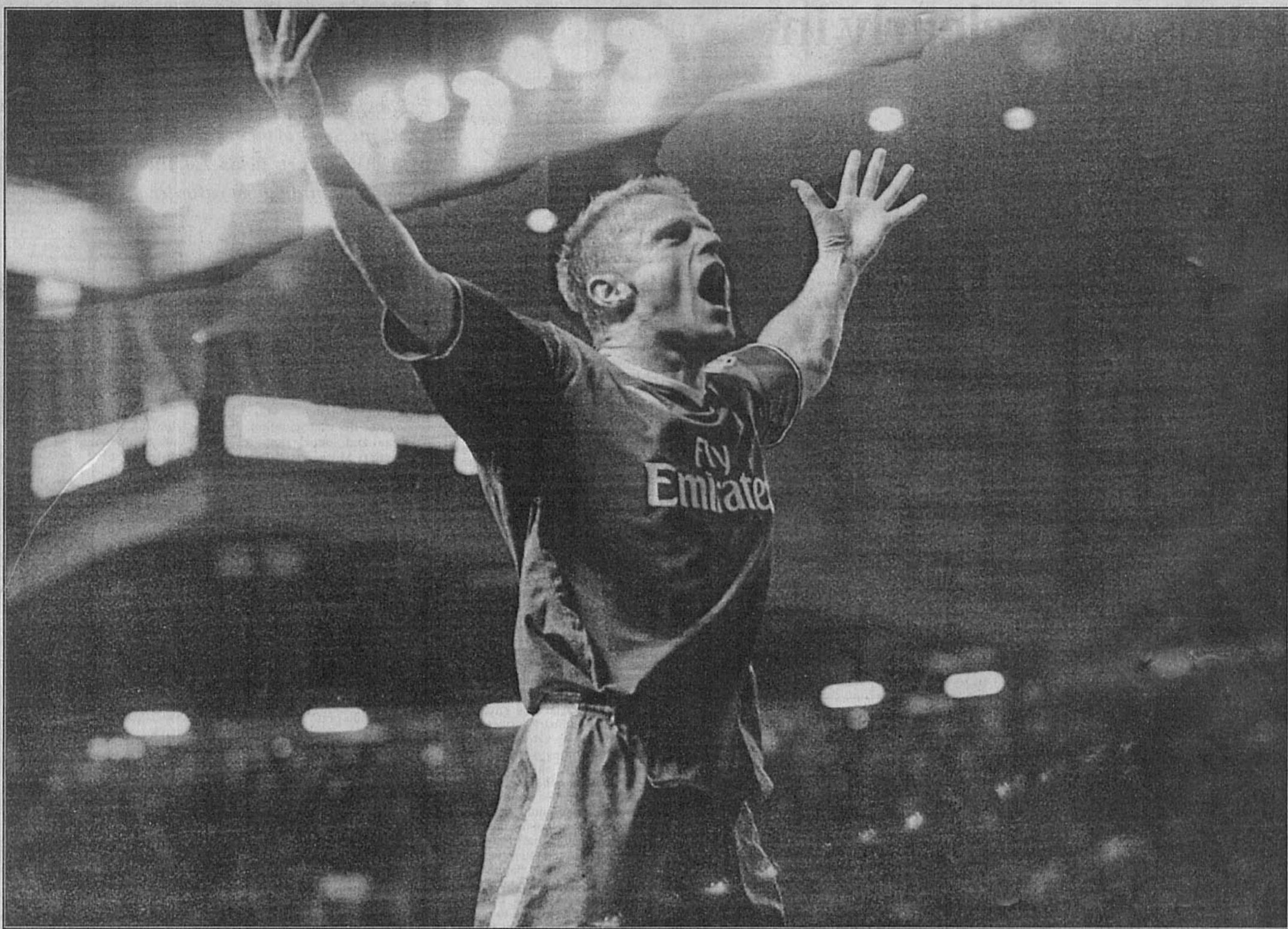
Football Association head of communications Adrian Bevington said: "We apologise for a regrettable oversight that shouldn't have occurred."

"There have been numerous outstanding black footballers since Viv Anderson's debut in 1978 and that should have been highlighted on the DVD."

The original list of players was selected by a group of 'englandfans' members, but the FA, who complained loudly at racist taunting aimed at black England players in a friendly with Spain in Madrid last November, had final responsibility for the contents of the DVD.

Piara Powar, spokesman for the Kick It Out anti-racism campaign, welcomed the FA's apology, while stressing the need for the governing body to remain acutely aware of such sensitive issues.

"We can understand the concerns that have been raised as black players have contributed an immense amount to the game in England, but the FA's apology shows they realise that they have made a faux-pas," he said.



Chelsea's Irish winger Damien Duff celebrates after scoring the winner against Manchester United at Old Trafford in Manchester on January 26.

PHOTO: AFP

ENGLISH LEAGUE CUP

United get the Blues

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United goalkeeper Tim Howard was forced to relive the worst moment of his career as Chelsea booked a League Cup final date with Liverpool with a 2-1 win at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

Damien Duff's 85th minute winner represented the perfect 42nd birthday gift for Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho, whose side ended Sir Alex Ferguson's proud record of never having lost a semi-final in nearly two decades in charge of United.

But for Howard, whose late error allowed Porto to knock United out of the Champions League on Mourinho's last visit to the Theatre of Dreams, it was another night to forget.

After Ryan Giggs had cancelled out Frank Lampard's first half goal for

Chelsea, United were looking the more likely winners as the tie -- goalless after the first leg -- headed towards extra time.

But the home side were left shell-shocked when a Duff free-kick from close to the right touchline was allowed to curl into the far corner of the net with Howard rooted to his spot in the centre of the goal.

"They scored from a free kick from 50 yards out. We are not happy about that," Ferguson moaned. "You can't expect to win games losing goals like that."

The American international's error against Porto cost him his first-team place. On this occasion however he was absolved by Ferguson, who instead pointed the finger at his central defenders.

"I thought the defenders have every chance to attack it and they have let it bounce into the corner of the net," he said, admitting that he

thought United were on course for victory before the decisive goal.

"It was a great game and you could not divide the teams tonight but I thought we had the far bigger momentum in the second half and played some excellent stuff."

"When we brought Wayne Rooney on we got into some great scoring positions."

Ferguson was philosophical about the end of his astonishing run of semi-final successes.

"I don't enjoy it but I suppose in an 18-year spell you would think it would happen sometime. I didn't want to happen tonight but it is the lesser of the tournaments you would want to get knocked out of."

The nature of Chelsea's victory was particularly cruel for Howard as it was his reflex save with his right boot that had kept United in the match just before Giggs's stunning equaliser.

But it could scarcely have been

sweeter for Mourinho. "The most important thing is to be alive, to be happy and have my family with me -- that is more important than football."

"But if you can finish your day with such an important victory, it's a perfect birthday. I will never forget it for sure."

Any doubts about the significance of the encounter were dispelled by a glance at the team sheets.

For United, Roy Keane was making his first appearance in the League Cup since the 2003 final while Giggs, Rio Ferdinand and Gary Neville were all turning out for the first time in the tournament this season.

Chelsea underlined their determination to earn a shot at the first trophy of the Roman Abramovich era by recalling first choice goalkeeper Petr Cech and deciding not to give striker Didier Drogba a rest.

It was United who started the

brighter of the two sides but the slick build-up work of Sir Alex Ferguson's men had failed to yield a single clear chance by the time Lampard put Chelsea ahead in the 29th minute from the visitors' first meaningful attack.

The England midfielder started it with a neat first-time pass for Arjen Robben from just inside his own area.

The Dutchman found Drogba on the left of United's box and, despite the attentions of both Ferdinand and Neville, the striker had enough time to pick out Lampard as he arrived in the area unnoticed by the rest of the United defence.

Barely ten yards from goal, the England midfielder collected the ball in his stride before sweeping a left foot shot past Howard.

United were unfortunate not to be given a chance to equalise seven minutes before the interval when

Quinton Fortune nicked the ball away from Wayne Bridge inside the Chelsea box and appeared to be brought down by the left-back's clumsy lunge.

But referee Rob Styles waved away the penalty appeals and United could have been dead and buried if Robben's low shot had not been kept out by Howard's instinctive save.

Less than two minutes later, United were back on level terms when Giggs ran on to a Gary Neville ball into the box and beat Cech with the most exquisite of chips, on the full volley with the outside of his left foot.

Duff's killer blow left United with only five minutes to claim an equaliser and they came desperately close to doing so.

A textbook header from Mikael Silvestre was cleared off the line by Bridge and a reflex save from Cech denied Cristiano Ronaldo.

Ronaldo's plea to militants

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian football star Ronaldo has recorded a message seeking the release of a fellow countryman -- Joao Jose Vasconcelos -- who was kidnapped by an armed Islamist group in Iraq last week, the hostage's brothers said.

The 2002 World Cup winner's message, recorded at the request of Vasconcelos' family, urges the kidnappers to free the engineer, according to the hostage's brother, Luis Henrique de Vasconcelos.

The recording by Ronaldo, who plays for Real Madrid, will be translated into Arabic and sent to television stations in the Middle East in a bid to help gain Vasconcelos' liberation, his brother told reporters here.

The family also recorded a message asking the kidnappers to show clemency and release Vasconcelos.

The 50-year-old engineer had been working for Brazilian construction company Norberto Odebrecht when he was kidnapped by the group, which calls itself the "Mujahedeen Squads."

ITALIAN CUP

Ambrosini gives advantage

AFP, Rome

Massimo Ambrosini scored twice as AC Milan edged Udinese 3-2 in a thrilling Italian Cup quarter-final, first leg at the San Siro.

Udinese's Davide di Michele also found the net twice but a late winner from Brazilian wingback Serginho gave Milan a slender advantage going into the second leg in Udine on March 16.

Ambrosini headed home Serginho's cross to give Milan a 17th minute lead before Udinese hit back with two goals before the break.

Di Michele miscued volley beat Christian Abbiati at the far post to level the score before the industrious midfielder followed up successfully after Dino Fava's shot was saved.

Serginho once again provided Ambrosini to restore equality in the 67th minute before getting on the scoresheet himself with a curling free-kick from just outside the penalty box.

In a welcome boost for AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti, striker Filippo Inzaghi made his first appearance since October 20. The Italy international, who underwent knee surgery, replaced Kakha Kaladze for the final 20 minutes and was given a standing ovation.

Dino Zoff's first game in charge of Fiorentina ended in a 1-0 defeat to Roma in the other first leg tie played earlier on Wednesday.

The former Italy coach, who captained the 1982 World Cup-winning Italian team, took the reins at the Florence club on Monday after caretaker coach Sergio Buso was sacked.

Victory for Roma completed a hat-trick of victories over Fiorentina this season, having already done the double over them in the league.

The only goal of a dull tie in the capital came five minutes before half time. Gaetano D'Agostino's driven free-kick found Daniele De Rossi whose firm header flashed past Cristiano Lupatelli in the Fiorentina goal.

The visitors came close to leveling the score midway through the second half, but Fabrizio Miccoli's fierce drive was palmed away superbly by Carlo Zotti.

On Thursday, Serie A's bottom club Atalanta, who knocked out current league leaders Juventus in the previous round, play at home to Inter Milan, and Cagliari entertain Sampdoria.

Hong Kong Friendly Parreira takes extra strikers

AP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira added FC Porto's Luis Fabiano and Real Betis' Ricardo Oliveira to his squad that will face Hong Kong in a friendly match on Feb. 9.

Parreira said he would not drop anybody from the original list of 22 players named on Jan. 19, the Brazilian Soccer Confederation said Wednesday on its Website.

The extra strikers were called because Parreira fears that some European clubs will not release their top players. Lyon and AC Milan have already expressed their intention of holding players, and others are expected to follow suit, local media has reported.

Parreira called Brazil's top stars for the friendly, including 2002 World Cup champions Ronaldo, Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos and Cafu.

The Brazilian Soccer Confederation reportedly will receive US\$1 million for the match in Hong Kong, which will interrupt the national Carnival holiday for Brazilian players. The squad is to assemble on Feb. 5, the start of the four-day pre-Lenten bash that climaxes on Feb. 8.

It will be Brazil's first match since losing to Ecuador 1-0 in a World Cup qualifier. Brazil trails leaders Argentina by two points in the 10th team South American group.

No Real interest?

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid have denied reports they have approached Inter Milan striker Adriano with a view to signing the Brazilian international.

The Madrid-based sports press have been reporting that the 23-year-old has been targeted by club president Florentino Perez as his next high-profile "Galactico" recruit.

"Given the appearance of recent reports that Real Madrid are interested in Adriano the club would like to make it clear that they have not had any direct or indirect contact with the player," read an official statement on the club's website on Wednesday. "Nor has Real Madrid had any contact with any intermediary or representative of the player."

"Whenever Real Madrid are interested in a player they always make contact with the player's club first."

Press speculation in Spain reached fever pitch this week after the player hinted that he would like to join Real in the future in an interview given to Spanish television station Canal Plus.

"Right now it would be very difficult for me (to play for Real Madrid) because I'm a very important player for Inter," said Adriano.

"I want to stay here and win a title and then maybe play at Real Madrid in the future."

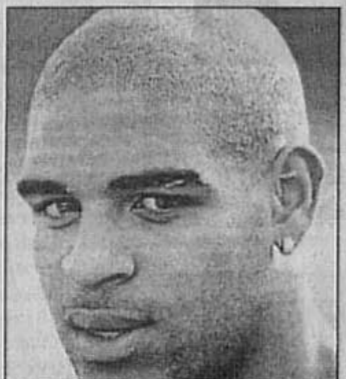
"I'm very happy and thankful because he (Real Madrid president Florentino Perez) had got a soft spot for me and I hope that one day I'll be

able to realise both his and my dream," he added.

"He follows my games and is interested in getting me to join his club and you have to be grateful for that sort of interest. I can't close doors to anyone."

Inter president Giacinto Facchetti insisted that there was no question of Adriano leaving the Serie A club.

"Adriano is an Inter player and he



ADRIANO

isn't moving from here," he was quoted as saying by the Spanish media. "We are getting a little tired of the reports that keep arriving from Spain."

Top scorer in Brazil's victorious Copa America campaign last year, Adriano has been in outstanding form for Inter, scoring 14 goals in the league this season and seven in the Champions League.

Real have Adriano's Brazil team mate Ronaldo on their books and are in negotiations to sign Santos forward Robinho.

Serie A thinking synthetic option

AFP, Rome

Some Serie A matches could be played on synthetic pitches as early as next season, the Italian football federation (FIGC) said.

"We need to establish whether or not the latest synthetic playing surfaces affect the performances of the players, but if they meet with their approval I think an artificial pitch could be used next season," said FIGC president Franco Carraro.

Last November UEFA, European football's governing body, lifted its ban on the use of artificial pitches for its international club competitions and now several European leagues are considering the use of artificial surfaces for domestic matches.

UEFA's decision to lift its ban came after two years of experiments on synthetic pitches in five different countries - Holland, Russia, Scotland, Austria and Sweden - where harsh winters can cause problems for natural surfaces.

Tests proved that the surfaces were suitable for competitive matches and were a vast improvement on the early 'plastic' pitches that were introduced in the 1980s.

Carraro said the San Siro, the ground shared by the two Milan clubs, AC and Inter, could benefit from having a synthetic playing surface given the problems they've had in the past.

"I take the San Siro as a good example as the players are always complaining about the poor quality of the pitch," he said.

Charges filed against Hoyzer

Football

REUTERS, Berlin

The German Football Association (DFB) said on Wednesday it had filed charges with Berlin public prosecutors relating to the case of Robert Hoyzer, the referee at the centre of Germany's match-fixing probe.

The DFB said in a statement it would continue its own investigations into a series of games refereed by Hoyzer, but public prosecutors would be able to apply their wider judicial powers.

"The DFB hopes in particular to clear up questions such as who was placing large bets on games refereed by Robert Hoyzer and whether there is any connection between these people and Hoyzer," the DFB said in a statement on its website.

According to the German Football Association (DFB), Hoyzer resigned on Friday after suspicions of match-fixing were raised against him.

Hoyzer, 25, has since denied any wrongdoing and his lawyers have challenged the validity of his resignation letter.

"Our client was summoned to Frankfurt under false pretences and confronted with accusations. He was then pressured into a signing a declaration 'to avoid any further disadvantage to himself'. He did not even receive a copy," Holthoff-Pfoertner, the law firm representing Hoyzer said in a statement.

Hoyzer's lawyer, Stephan

Holthoff-Pfoertner, has strongly criticised the DFB's handling of the situation.

"What the DFB did with my client at the hearing on Friday was no investigation -- it was an execution," Holthoff-Pfoertner told the Neue Rhein newspaper.

The DFB's statement to the media on Saturday reported Hoyzer's resignation and said he was under suspicion of betting on Hamburg SV's 4-2 defeat by regional league side Paderborn SC in August last year and manipulating the result.

The DFB's probe has since widened to look at five other matches, four of them refereed by Hoyzer.

Germany's Sueddeutsche Zeitung reported in an advance copy of its Thursday edition, that German police could not control illegal sport betting.

The paper said according to an internal report by Bavaria's state criminal investigation authority to Germany's 16 federal state governments, police and prosecutors had launched 300 investigations since 2000, but most of them were still underway. "The gambling scene appears to be unaffected by our current measures. We have managed to keep illegal betting from expanding, but it has stagnated at a high level," the paper quoted the report as saying.



ROBERT HOYZER