



Bahrain's Sayed Mohammed Adnan (L) tries a sliding tackle on Inter Milan's Argentinian midfielder Santiago Solari during their friendly match at the Bahrain National Stadium in Riffa on Saturday.

## Adriano lights up Bahrain

INTERNET, undated

Adriano had a disastrous 2006, but started the new year on the right foot with a brace and fine performance for Inter in Bahrain.

The Brazilian had struggled throughout the last 12 months, his goal against Atalanta just before the Christmas break his first for the club since March, but he seems to have found his form at last.

He scored two goals in Sunday's 6-1 friendly victory over the Bahrain national side at the National Stadium in Manama, but also earned a penalty and performed a stunning nutmeg on an opponent, suggesting his confidence is back.

Luis Figo also impressed in front of a crowd he'll see again soon enough, as he has already signed a princely contract – said to be worth 5.7-million pounds for one year – with Saudi club Al-Ittihad to begin in July.

Adriano rose to nod in Figo's cross after 28 minutes and then ran on to another of the Portuguese legend's passes to delicately flick the ball over the goalkeeper.

L'Imperatore earned a penalty for a push from the shot-stopper, which Zlatan Ibrahimovic converted, and Douglas Maicon tapped in Inter's fourth of the game.

Santiago Solari's sweeping cross found Mariano Gonzalez at the back post and in the final minutes Bahrain netted a consolation goal with Hussain's left-foot strike.

Gonzalez completed his brace at the end by pouncing on a parried Lampros Choutos effort.

## Ferguson rates Scholes best

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson believes former England midfielder Paul Scholes is playing well enough to be an early contender for Footballer of the Year.

Scholes, who has grabbed five goals this season, has returned to top form after suffering blurred vision and Ferguson has nothing for admiration for the veteran.

"I think everyone at the club and the supporters would be delighted if Paul got an honour," said the United manager.

"He's scored five goals for me and that is up with the best of them in the country in that role."

"His football brain -- and the football he produces at times -- is marvellous. It would be great for him to get an award like that."

Ferguson has hinted he could make two new signings in the transfer window but is already pleased with the quality in his squad.

"I am happy with what I have," he said ahead of the FA Cup match against Aston Villa on Sunday.

"The players are improving. They are good professionals and train well. You expect to see an improvement when they are at a young age."

"We have lot of cover as well, if you look at our back four positions. I am okay there and we have reasonable cover in midfield."

"Up front, we have brought in Henrik Larsson and that is a bonus. Then there is Ole Gunnar Solskjaer. He will get 15 goals for us this season if he stays fit."

## Mourinho's darkest hour

Football

REUTERS, London

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho scoffed on Saturday at suggestions he was going through the toughest phase of his career.

Speaking after the Premier League champions thumped fourth division Macclesfield 6-1 in the FA Cup third round, Mourinho told reporters: "I've been laughing a lot about it."

"Also in my country it's been written 'the dark moment of Jose Mourinho'.

"Is the dark moment of my career three (Premier League) draws, second in the premiership, last 16 of the Champions League and semi-finals of the League Cup? It means my career has not been bad."

The Portuguese added, however, that a string of injuries were causing problems.

Chelsea trail league leaders

Manchester United by six points after drawing at home to Reading and Fulham and away at Aston Villa over the last two weeks.

One of the chief criticisms of the champions has been the poor form of Andriy Shevchenko, bought from AC Milan for around 29 million pounds (£5.32 million dollars) last year.

Mourinho said last week the Ukraine striker was not performing. Shevchenko failed to score again on Saturday but Mourinho said his performance was much improved.

"It's frustrating for a striker to be in a team that wins 6-1 and not be on the score sheet," said the Chelsea manager.

"In some other matches maybe he accepted this without a fight. Today he fought hard and worked for the team."

Mourinho said England stalwart Frank Lampard, who scored a hat-trick, should have been rested but French under-21 midfielder Michael Essien.

Lassana Diarra failed to turn up in time for a team meeting and had been dropped.

"I started with Lamps and in the first half he was crucial for us."

Lampard's treble was followed by goals from Shaun Wright-Phillips, John Obi Mikel and Ricardo Carvalho.

Macclesfield played most of the second half with 10 men after goalkeeper Tommy Lee was sent off for bringing down Shevchenko in the area.

Chelsea are missing captain John Terry, fellow defender Khalid Boulahrouz, wingers Joe Cole and Arjen Robben and goalkeepers Petr Cech and Carlo Cudicini through injury.

Mourinho said with Carvalho suspended for Wednesday's League Cup semifinal first leg against Wycombe Wanderers, Chelsea would be playing with a makeshift central defence of full-back Paulo Ferreira and midfielder Michael Essien.

## Figo deal completed

INTERNET, undated

Former World Player of the Year Luis Figo has signed an 18-month contract with Al Ittihad for an undisclosed sum, the Saudi club said on Sunday.

"I can confirm that Luis Figo of Inter has signed an official contract with Ittihad starting on July 1, 2007," Ittihad director-general Rafat Turki told Reuters.

"I have no right to release the value but we concluded a deal acceptable to both sides that is the highest, not just in the Middle East, but in Asia for a player that is worth the value."

Italian and Saudi newspapers had been reporting for weeks that the 34-year-old Portuguese midfielder, whose contract with Inter expires at the end of the season, was on the brink of moving to the Jeddah-based club.

Inter dismissed the report several days ago saying in a statement on its Web site that there was no negotiation underway.

Inter coach Roberto Mancini, who was in Bahrain with his team for a training camp and a friendly against Bahrain's national team, told the Gulf Daily News that Figo would stay at least until his contract expired at the end of the year.

But Turki said Ittihad had clinched the deal in Bahrain on Thursday night.

## Alex savours San Siro date

INTERNET, undated

Alessandro Del Piero admits he enjoyed facing off against Milan on the grand stage of San Siro again and can't wait to return next season.

"I really enjoyed myself," said the Juventus star after the 3-2 Trofeo Berlusconi defeat on Saturday evening.

"It was great to come back to San Siro. It's a fantastic stadium, there's no doubt about it, and we can be fairly happy with our performance."

Del Piero had scored the goal that put the Bianconeri 2-1 up, but a late push saw Milan emerge with the silverware in this prestigious friendly postponed from the summer due to Champions League commitments.

It was an important game for the World Cup winner, who has been treading the boards of Serie B this term and relished the opportunity to play in the spotlight.

"Juve still need to improve, but the players must focus on doing well this season and above all performing our duty for this club."

They may be climbing towards an immediate promotion into the top flight after their demotion in the Calcio poli scandal, but not all is relaxed in Turin.

David Trezeguet and Gianluigi Buffon have confirmed they will only stay with Juventus if they can challenge for the Scudetto straight away, so how does Del Piero see the situation?

"It's not just them the club has to convince, but me as well! Of course all of us want to fly high and be part of the great side that is Juventus. I'm sure the directors will do everything they can to give us a competitive squad."

## Cassano blasts Capello

Football

INTERNET, undated

Antonio Cassano has bitterly criticised Fabio Capello and Real Madrid.

"When Capello left Roma I was the only one to defend him, and believe me that approach cost me a great deal both in terms of friendships and economically. I was forced to leave," explained the fiery talent.

"The Coach often spoke highly of me when he moved away, but here I made one mistake and he immediately cut me loose."

Cassano always hailed 'Don Fabio' as his mentor, effectively freezing him out of a Giallorossi environment that was horrified by

the switch to Juventus three seasons ago, but their reunion at the Bernabeu has proved less than idyllic.

The ex-Barri starlet was substituted at half-time in the 1-0 defeat to Getafe on October 14 and has barely set foot on the field since.

"In at least 10 games I warmed up without ever coming on, and I remember each one," he told the 'Gazzetta dello Sport'.

"I lost 8kg and worked hard, but now I'm the last choice striker. Apart from Ronaldo, who is a level above, I think I'm on a par with everyone else here."

Yet Spanish newspaper 'As' suggests a shock transfer deal is in the air for the January window. It's claimed that Real directors offered Ronaldo and Cassano to

Milan in a two-for-one package, but Adriano Galliani rejected the proposal because both are Cupped in Europe.

Now Cassano is forced to re-evaluate his future and realise not many clubs can afford 2.8-pounds per season wages.

"Inter or Milan? The Nerazzurri play very well, while the Rossoneri have a lot of problems to resolve and it's by no means certain I am their solution," confessed the Italian international.

"I need affection, respect, to feel loved and considered important for a club. At Madrid, I have none of the above. Without these elements, I can't perform. I have had my smile taken away here. In football terms, I am no longer myself."

Larsson frustrated Newcastle

AFP, Birmingham

The FA CUP

Sebastian Larsson grabbed a late equaliser to earn 10-man Birmingham a 2-2 FA Cup third round draw against Newcastle at St Andrews.

Larsson struck with just four minutes remaining to rescue the Championship leaders after Steven Taylor and Kieron Dyer had scored to put Newcastle ahead following DJ Campbell's opener.

Newcastle, six-times FA Cup winners, looked on course for the victory when Birmingham defender Radhi Jaidi was sent off for a professional foul on Obafemi Martins just before half-time, but Larsson, on loan from Arsenal, struck to force a St James's Park replay a week on Wednesday.

With Newcastle still struggling with a host of injuries, there was no doubt Birmingham manager Steve Bruce sensed an opportunity to topple Premiership opposition as he fielded a first 11 rich in goalscoring potential.

"Up front, we have brought in Henrik Larsson and that is a bonus. Then there is Ole Gunnar Solskjaer. He will get 15 goals for us this season if he stays fit."

Taylor cleared mid-fielder Fabrice Muamba's close-range effort off the line in the 36th minute as United struggled to contain wave after wave of City attack.

However, Roeder's men finally recovered from a disastrous start and five minutes before half-time it was the unmarked Taylor who drew the visitors level, stroking home James Milner's corner at the near post.

But it was Campbell who brought a disappointingly sparse St Andrews crowd to its feet after just 15 minutes when he stabbed home his seventh goal of the season.

Signed a year ago by Bruce, the former Yeading and Brentford forward has enjoyed a promising season of Championship football and his first strike in four games handed City a fully deserved lead.

Larsson floated in a left wing corner and Premiership transfer target Matthew Upson comfortably out-jumped a static Newcastle defence to head back across goal.

With four players on the line United still allowed Campbell space to pick his spot and Magpies' goalkeeper Shay Given, captaining his club in the absence of the suspended England international Scott Parker, was clearly furious with his young back-four.

And the Magpies paid for their profligacy four minutes from time when Larsson turned home a flicked header from substitute Neil Danns.

## FRENCH CUP

# Calais stun Lorient

Football

AFP, Paris

Tiny Calais caused the shock of the round in the last 64 of the French Cup, beating first division Lorient 2-0.

Calais, from the fourth rung of the complicated French league structure, are no strangers to improbable cup runs having reached the quarterfinals a year ago and gone all the way to the final in 2000.

But few could have expected the part-timers to embark on yet another glorious cup campaign when matched with Lorient.

Yet goals from Mathieu Hogue on 24 minutes and Djezou Boutouille 15 minutes from the end were enough to see-off their top flight opponents.

"I feel only joy, this is the magic of the cup," said Calais coach Sylvain Jore. "This will bring great joy to the people of Calais."

Lorient were not the only victims of an upset as Rennes lost 3-1 after extra time at home to third division Romorantin.

Gilles Fabien gave Romorantin the lead shortly after the break but

John Utaka equalised for the hosts on 72 minutes.

In extra-time, though, it was the visitors who turned on the pressure, scoring twice in the second period to seal their passage into the next round.

On-loan Liverpool striker Djibril Cisse scored a hat-trick for Marseille as they narrowly avoided a shock, coming through 4-1 after extra time against fifth division Cambrai.

Cisse gave the former European Cup winners, and last season's beaten finalists, the lead on 18 minutes but Julien Bailleul equalised for hosts Cambrai with a quarter of an hour to play.

But the first division team proved to strong in the extra period with Cisse completing his first treble for Marseille before Toifilou Maoulida rounded off the scoring.

France's 1998 World Cup winning goalkeeper Fabien Barthez, who has gone back on his decision to retire, played his first game for Nantes but had little to do as his new employers beat Guingamp 1-0.

The match was Barthez's first since playing in France's 2006 World Cup final loss to Italy in Berlin last July.

A year ago Monaco were the

victims of a shock against Colmar but they made no mistake at fourth division Quevilly, coming through 2-0 thanks to goals from Lopez and Gerard and Gonzalo Vargas.

There were no fairytales for the two smallest teams left in the competition as Pont de Cheruy of the seventh tier lost 1-0 at home to top flight Sedan.

Pluvigner of the sixth tier also lost at home to first division opposition, going down 3-0 against Le Mans.

First division Troyes were upset 4-2 by Second Division Libourne St Seurin as Croatian striker Zvonimir Deranja bagged a hat-trick while beleaguered Nantes looked to be heading for extra-time against second division Guingamp until Nicolas Savinaud's last minute winner broke the deadlock.

Auxerre needed a late goal from former France international Bruno Pedretti to earn a 2-2 draw at home to second division Niort to take that into extra-time.

There were two all-first division ties with Sochaux winning 3-1 at St Etienne and Lens coming back from 3-1 down to force extra-time at Nancy.

Thailand, his brother has ruled himself out.

"Unfortunately, I won't be going. I have spoken with Chelsea and they feel it is best I stay here at such an important time during the football season," he told Filipino media.

"This is the period where decisions will be made