

## Not all well at S Africa

AFP, Johannesburg

South African Premier Soccer League (PSL) chief Trevor Phillips has slammed the disruption caused to local league matches as a result of the rush to upgrade stadia ahead of the 2010 World Cup.

"Everybody is rushing to upgrade stadiums, forgetting that we have a league to run. If dates for these renovations had been given to us earlier then we would not have this crisis," PSL chief executive Phillips complained.

The furor erupted after stadia previously used as venues for professional soccer matches were bulldozed, and are now being renovated as preparations for the world event go into full swing.

This has forced the sixteen PSL teams to find alternative venues far from their local bases, or share the few available pitches.

"Stadium unavailability experienced in the first round of the league, is expected to continue," said Phillips.

"We need greater coordination of activities between the local municipalities, the League and other vital stakeholders."

In December last year, Soccer City stadium in Soweto, where the opening and closing matches of the World Cup will take place, was closed and home team Kaizer Chiefs had to find an alternative venue.

They are expected to share this venue with two more soccer teams, and a local rugby team in Pretoria.

Ten stadia have been chosen as host venues for 2010 Wold Cup matches.

## Cahill boosts Everton

AFP, Liverpool

Influential Australian midfielder Tim Cahill is expected to return to the Everton team to face Reading in the Premiership at Goodison Park on Sunday.

David Moyes' side have suffered during his absence, winning only four of 11 games and going out of the FA Cup following their third-round defeat to Blackburn last weekend.

Assistant boss Alan Irvine cannot wait to have him back in the fold, after a week of full training.

"When key players are out, it makes a huge difference to results and performances," said Irvine.

"Tim coming back will be a massive boost. It will almost be like Chelsea getting (John) Terry and (Petr) Cech back."

Cahill has been sidelined since November 11 when he picked up a knee injury in the match against Aston Villa.

Meanwhile, Reading intend to recruit only British players to the Madejski Stadium while the current transfer window remains open.

The Royals already have a cosmopolitan squad with internationals from USA, South Korea, Iceland and Nigeria battling for places with teammates from England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

But director of football Nick Hammond confirmed: "It is almost guaranteed there will be no signings from abroad. There's a time of adjustment when players come in from overseas."

"If you sign a player now and want them to affect the first team then they need to be up and running. So it's more likely to be players from over here."

## Larsson pledges more work rate

AFP, Manchester

Veteran Swedish star Henrik Larsson is determined to build on his goal-scoring debut for Manchester United when he faces Aston Villa for the second time in a week at Old Trafford on Saturday.

Larsson was on target in the 2-1 FA Cup win against Villa last week and comes up against Martin O'Neill's struggling side again in the Premiership where United look to maintain their stranglehold on top of the table.

"I was happy with my fitness and sharpness but I can't get carried away because this was just one game," said Larsson who is on a 10-week loan from Swedish side Helsingborgs.

"One swallow doesn't make a summer and I know I need to keep working hard and improving."

"When I play next is up to the boss (Sir Alex Ferguson), but whether I come on as a substitute or play from the start, I will be doing my best."

Martin O'Neill believes Gavin McCann is making the same kind of impact for Aston Villa as Neil Lennon did under his command at Leicester and Celtic.

Lennon was part of the midfield triumvirate at Leicester also consisting of Robbie Savage and Muzzy Izzet, which was the bedrock of the Foxes success under O'Neill and he was equally important after moving to Parkhead.

McCann is a similar sort of player and his know-how and experience has been crucial in a young team although O'Neill insists there is more to his game than just breaking up play.



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid's new recruit Gonzalo Higuain (L) shields the ball from Real Betis midfielder Capi during their King's Cup match at the Manuel Ruiz de Lopera Stadium in Seville on Thursday.

# Real aim to end rot

AFP, Madrid



David Beckham's long goodbye to Real Madrid begins on Sunday with the former England skipper likely to be given a rare start as the Spanish giants seek to reignite their season.

Beckham, who will leave Spain to play for Los Angeles Galaxy in the United States at the end of the season, could feature in coach Fabio Capello's plans as injuries and suspensions mount at Real who have lost three of their last four league games.

Despite the dismal run, Real are still third but are now five points behind leaders Sevilla and will be looking to recover their poise by beating Real Zaragoza on Sunday.

Jose Maria 'Guti' Gutierrez is out for the next week after twisting an ankle early in the 2-0 loss to Deportivo La Coruna last Sunday and Beckham is the midfielder's natural replacement.

Capello also has to decide what to do about the right back position, with nobody available who is accustomed normally to playing there.

Michel Salgado and Sergio Ramos are both suspended while new Brazilian signing Marcelo was injured in training and is out for six

weeks.

Zaragoza's Uruguayan international Carlos Diogo will miss the trip to his old club after being banned for five matches after his punch up with Sevilla's Luis Fabiano on Saturday.

Sevilla lost that match 2-1 to confirm their frailty away from home but they will be looking to extend their 100 per cent record at home in their Sanchez Pizjuan stadium this season against Real Mallorca on Saturday.

With Luis Fabiano also banned for five matches, the role of playing alongside the Spanish first division's top scorer Fredi Kanoute is likely to fall to Sevilla's Uruguayan striker Ernesto Chevanton.

Barcelona continue their quest for a third successive league title at local rivals Espanyol on Saturday.

Barca lie second to Sevilla, two points behind the surprise league leaders who last won La Liga in 1946, but the Catalans have a game in hand.

"We have to pick up three points," said Barca's midfielder Edmilson, well aware that Barca have drawn three of their their last four games.

"We may have beaten them twice in the (pre-season) Spanish Super Cup but in front of their home fans we'll be climbing a steeper slope."

The match brings together Barcelona captain Carles Puyol and

Espanyol's Ivan De La Pena, his fellow Spanish international and close friend from the days when they were together in the Barca youth academy.

"Our friendship is forgotten as soon as we are on the pitch. Each one of us is determined to win and for his team. But what happens on the pitch, stays on the pitch and we are friends again straight away afterwards," explained Puyol.

De La Pena said: "I think Carles is one of the best central defenders in the world, for his concentration, aggression, and the way he takes control of the game."

Barcelona could well be without their Portuguese international winger Deco, who picked up a thigh injury in training on Wednesday while Espanyol will be missing their suspended midfielder Pablo Zabaleta.

## FIXTURES

(Kick-off times in GMT)  
**Saturday**  
Valencia v Levante (1900), Espanyol v Barcelona (2100)  
**Sunday**  
Athletic Bilbao v Villarreal (1600), Gimnastic Tarragona v Getafe (1600), Osasuna v Real Betis (1600), Racing Santander v Real Sociedad (1600), Recreativo Huelva v Deportivo La Coruna (1600), Sevilla v Real Mallorca (1600), Celta Vigo v Atletico Madrid (1800), Real Madrid v Real Zaragoza (2000)

## KING'S CUP Betis hold Real

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's problems continued when they failed to break down a relegation-threatened Real Betis and had to settle for a 0-0 draw in a dull Spanish Cup last 16 first leg match on Thursday.

Spanish sports daily Marca held an internet poll during the course of the match and more than 65 per cent of respondents said that Real would not miss David Beckham when he leaves for Los Angeles Galaxy in the summer.

However, his former fans might be thinking again after Real's poor showing for which the former England captain was dropped by coach Fabio Capello.

"I am only going to talk about this game and that is another matter," said Capello when the subject of Beckham's departure was raised.

"I liked the spirit of our team tonight. I'm happy," added Capello.

"A 0-0 draw is definitely not a bad result on a difficult pitch. They had the best of the first half, when they had two good chances, but I think we were better in the second."

On balance, the home side had the best chances and Betis's Brazilian winger Wagner had two excellent opportunities to open the scoring in the first half.

Madrid had to rely on their two new Argentine acquisitions for their best attempts to break the deadlock.

Gonzalo Higuain nearly marked his Real debut with a goal but his right foot effort midway through the first half brought an outstanding save from goalkeeper Pedro Contreras, himself a former Madrid player.

"He did well. People who come here from other continents usually need a bit of time to adapt to European football," said Capello.

Fernando Gago sent a shot from the edge of the area whistling over the bar after 73 minutes but, like everyone else, the midfielder ended the night without a goal to his name.

Real's injury woes among their defenders also increased when Brazilian left back Roberto Carlos limped off after just 11 minutes.

Club medical officials later said that they feared he could be out for up to a month with a torn right calf muscle.

Real have now only won one of their last six matches in all competitions.

The second leg will be on January 18 at Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

## Oddo not for sale

INTERNET, undated

Lazio chief Claudio Lotito has continued to maintain that Milan target Massimo Oddo is not for sale.

The defender is a confirmed target for the Rossoneri even if Vice-President Adriano Galliani confessed on Tuesday that the two parties were far from reaching an agreement.

"Lazio have never put Oddo on sale, therefore it is useless to talk about figures," said the capital chief before entering the Lega Calcio offices in Milan on Friday.

"His contract expires in 2008 and that is it. Of course, if he wanted to leave, and this is an option from what I read, we would not block him. We would only need the right offer to let him go."

The 30-year-old started his career in Milan's youth team and he has reiterated that he would be happy to join the Rossoneri again.

"Oddo might want to leave, but I would also like to be the President of the Republic. Things aren't always that easy," noted Lotito.

"We do not need the money, so I don't want to talk about that aspect. The problem is that we would need to replace him from a technical point of view. We need everyone's will to solve this issue."

Galliani confirmed that the two clubs have not reached an agreement over a fee, although new meetings are scheduled for next week.

"We spoke this morning, but there is still a gap between what we are offering and Lazio's request," said the official on the Gazzetta dello Sport's website.

"We will meet next week to discuss it again. What will happen? I don't know -- I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic."

"Let's say that our chances of signing Oddo are 50-50. If he doesn't arrive then we will not make any more moves on the market," ended Galliani.

## COPPA ITALIA

# Milan see semi spot



INTERNET, undated

Milan have one foot in the semi-finals of the Italian Cup after a 2-0 win over Arezzo at the San Siro.

Goals from Alberto Gilardino and Pippo Inzaghi ensured a first leg win which puts the Italian giants in pole position ahead of the return leg.

The home side started the tie as hot favourites given that Arezzo, the only Second Division outfit left in the competition, are struggling at the bottom of Serie B.

Yet boss Carlo Ancelotti fielded a relatively strong starting XI for an Italian Cup encounter by opting for a midfield and attack full of regular first team players.

Brazilian Ricardo Oliveira had the first two real opportunities of the game. He was denied on six minutes by a fabulous reaction save by Bremec's foot, before his 12th minute effort was weakly struck towards the Arezzo shot-stopper.

Arezzo, unbeaten in seven Coppa games -- their best ever run, did prove difficult to break down though and ventured forwards themselves at times.

Di Donato tried his luck from distance that was easily saved by Zeljko Kalac, before the latter had to rush off his line to deny Volpato after he had outpaced Dario Simic.

Milan had to wait until minute 28 to seriously threaten again with Oliveira and then Pirlo, before taking the lead soon after.

Clarence Seedorf expertly played in Gilardino, who rounded the goalkeeper before squeezing the ball in from a tight angle.

That was the Italian striker's

ninth goal of the season, if you include his Azzurri strike against France, and he should have been celebrating his tenth in the 42nd minute.

He again combined with Seedorf but, after breaking the

120 seconds later. However, his left-footed angled drive was blocked by Bremec, who would later deny him again after a close range header from a Seedorf cross.

With his side in control,



ALBERTO GILARDINO

offside trap, blasted the ball just over the bar from 18 yards with only the 'keeper to beat.

That was to be Gila's last contribution as he was replaced by Inzaghi at the break. And SuperPippo made an instant impact. Seedorf again proved himself to be the assist king of the evening as his ball broke the offside trap and Inzaghi, unlike Gilardino, tucked it powerfully into the bottom corner to make it 2-0.

Inzaghi, who this week insisted he would only remain at the club if he was still considered as a key figure, almost made it three just

Ancelotti decided to give new signing Leandro Grimi his debut on the hour mark just hours after he officially became a Milan man.

The San Siro hosts tested Arezzo again through Inzaghi and Oliveira before a late scare in minute 79. Terra thought he had got a crucial away goal, but he was adjudged to have fouled Billy Costacurta in the build up.

Milan were then denied a third in the closing stages when a close range Oliveira thunderbolt was superbly blocked by Bremec's wonderful save. It ended Milan 2 Arezzo 0.

# Mourinho to quit Chelsea?



AFP, London

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho is set to quit the Premiership champions at the end of the season, according to reports here on Friday.

The frustrated Blues boss is reported to have told a close friend that he will leave Stamford Bridge in May, the Sun newspaper reported.

"That's it. I'm going at the end of the season... I don't know where yet," Mourinho is reported to have said.

The 42-year-old Portuguese coach is furious that his plans to strengthen his injury-hit squad have been blocked by the club's refusal to fund the purchase of

new players.

Chelsea's resources have been stretched to the limit by a combination of suspensions and injuries, most importantly to captain John Terry. These have exacerbated the problems caused by the poor form of major signings Andriy Shevchenko and Michael Ballack.

Mourinho expressed his frustration after their 1-1 draw at League Two Wycombe in the first leg of their League Cup semi-final on Wednesday.

"I have asked for players and it's not my choice that no one is coming. It's not my club, I am just a manager," he said.

"I expect my squad to be the same at the end of the transfer window as it was at the start."

A rift is reported to have

opened up between Mourinho and Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich and the club's chief executive Peter Kenyon, and there has been suggestions that the Russian tycoon will seek to bring Dutchman Guus Hiddink, currently in charge of Russia, to London at the end of this season if Mourinho fails to deliver victory in the Champions League.

Italian side Inter Milan and Spanish giants Real Madrid are both reported to be interested in signing Mourinho who arrived in London in June 2004 after leading FC Porto in his native Portugal to the Champions League title.

He helped the English side win their first top-flight domestic title in 50 years in 2005, a trophy they defended last season.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Swedish international Christian Wilhelmsson shows his new jersey during his presentation to the media at AS Roma's training centre of Trigoria on Thursday.