



PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal striker Julio Baptista (R) places the ball into the back of the net to score his second goal in their derby Carling Cup semifinal clash against Tottenham at White Hart Lane in London on Wednesday.

## Hughes can be Fergie successor

AFP, London

Manchester United captain Gary Neville is glad that former England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson did not become the manager at the club. And the influential club skipper believes Blackburn manager Mark Hughes, a former big name at Old Trafford, could go on to replace Sir Alex Ferguson when the Scot finally steps down.

Neville played with a clutch of one-time United players now in management but has named Hughes as the most suited to following in Ferguson's footsteps.

Ferguson performed a U-turn in 2002 after claiming he would retire at the end of the 2001/02 season and instead signed a new deal with the club.

Although there is no fixed date for his departure at the moment, the speculation over his successor is never far away and Neville's backing is sure to put Hughes' name firmly back in the frame.

The England full-back told the Daily Mirror: "Playing with the likes of Bryan Robson and Steve Bruce you always thought they'd go on to be managers."

"Some may have thought one of them would be our next manager but I certainly didn't think Sparky à Hughes would be a manager yet out of the three."

"He's probably now the most outstanding candidate for it."

"He really seems to have taken to to management."

## Nice president steps down

AFP, Paris

The president of Nice football club, Maurice Cohen, stepped down from his post after Wednesday's 1-0 defeat to Toulouse amid pressure from majority shareholders.

"A meeting of shareholders took place this afternoon at the request of two of them, Franck Giudicelli and Marcel Governatori, who hold 57 percent of shares. They demanded my resignation," Cohen said.

"Franck Giudicelli will take over the role of club president from tomorrow (Thursday)," he added.

Nice are currently second from bottom of the French first division, having won just three games of 21 played for 16 points, one ahead of Sedan.

## Drogba named goodwill ambassador

AFP, Geneva

Ivory Coast and Chelsea footballer Didier Drogba was named a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Development Programme on Wednesday, joining other luminaries from the sport such as Ronaldo and Zinedine Zidane.

The 28-year-old, who signed for the English premiership club for a reported 24 million pounds (47 million dollars, 36 million euros) in 2004, will receive symbolic earnings of one dollar per year for his work in UNDP's anti-poverty campaign.

"I have been given opportunities to succeed in life, but I constantly think about the ones who did not have this chance. We all need to contribute to help defeat poverty," Drogba said.

He will focus in particular on the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa and the need to change male attitudes there.

"As a man and a role model for many young boys in Africa I will do my best to promote the right messages to other men and boys to stop the pandemic," he said.

# Beast delights Wenger

## Football

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger believes Brazilian midfielder Julio Baptista is finally ready to play a key role in Arsenal's challenge for honours.

Baptista, nicknamed the Beast, had struggled to make an impact with Wenger's side since his pre-season loan move from Real Madrid.

But he showed he is starting to adapt to English football as his double strike sparked Arsenal's superb fightback to earn a 2-2 draw in the first leg of the League Cup semifinal against Tottenham on Wednesday.

Baptista could have been forgiven for thinking he was in for another dispiriting night after his own goal following Dimitar Berbatov's early strike gave Tottenham a 2-0 lead at White Hart Lane.

But the former Sevilla player made himself a hero with the Arsenal fans by scoring twice from close range in the second half to put his side back in the tie ahead of next Wednesday's second leg.

Wenger said: "Julio Baptista has shown again what a player he is. He scored an own goal, but instead of feeling sorry for himself he scored two for us."

"He is mentally a very strong player and he will get his chance to play more as the season goes on."

"It took him four or five months to adapt, but he is in my mind."

Wenger has allowed Baptista to adapt gradually and the League Cup has been his training ground.

He obviously enjoys the competition after scoring four times in Arsenal's 6-3 win at Liverpool in the quarterfinals.

"He likes it here and likes the atmosphere inside the squad," Wenger added. "It is a different game than in Spain but he has enough physical and mental strength to adapt."

"You can play him anywhere there is a hole. He has the sense to get into the box from deep positions when it is needed, so the central role is more suited for him."

Wenger, who may be without Alexander Hleb for several weeks after he suffered a hamstring injury, once again fielded an inexperienced side as he kept faith with his young players and he was rewarded with an heroic display.

"It is great for the confidence of the young players to know that, away from home, they can come back after a little bit of a shaky start," Wenger said.

"Many teams so young would have crumbled at 2-0, but we still kept going and came back."

"I compared the game to Anfield because in that match everything went for us, but in the first half here everything went against us, so it was a good test of the heart and mental strength of the team."

"I'm very proud of that because it

is an important quality at the top level."

Tottenham are unbeaten in their 12 matches in the League, FA and UEFA Cups this season, but there was an overwhelming sense of resignation from boss Martin Jol.

He admitted his side had squandered a glorious chance to take a giant step towards their first final in five years and claimed Berbatov's groin injury in the first half was decisive.

"We are very disappointed but we only have ourselves to blame. We have to learn from this."

"In the first 25 minutes we were outstanding but when Berbatov went off that had a big effect. He was holding the ball up and we missed him when he went off."

"We couldn't get a third goal but we couldn't keep the ball in the second half and they kept coming back."

"Even then it needed two mistakes from us for them to score, but that is another thing we need to learn. If you lose the momentum you can concede goals."

Berbatov had headed Tottenham into the lead after 12 minutes before Baptista deflected Tom Huddlestone's free-kick into his own net nine minutes later.

But Wenger's young guns refused to accept defeat and Baptista turned in Emmanuel Eboue's cross after 64 minutes before sliding in to equalise in the 77th minute.

## Defensive backing for Becks, Ron

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Spanish international defenders Ivan Helguera and Michel Salgado on Wednesday leapt to the defence of out-of-favour team-mates David Beckham and Ronaldo.

"Ronaldo's one of the best in the world, if not the best. I don't think it's fair, the situation he is in," Helguera told Radio Marca.

Helguera himself was also frozen out at the start of the season and had to train with Real's reserve team before winning over Italian coach Fabio Capello.

He said he thought Ronaldo and Beckham had not been well-treated and still had something to offer.

"I also went through that. You have to be fair and respectful with people who try to give their all, especially a club as great as Real Madrid," added Helguera.

Salgado said at a press conference on Wednesday that it might be rash to sideline a clutch of players with half the season still to play.

"The coach decides who will play more often and who less but this is a squad and to leave three or four players on the outside five months before the end of the season is not good for the squad," he said.

Beckham had only started a handful of league games this season prior to announcing his summer move to Los Angeles Galaxy on January 11.

Capello responded two days later by saying that Beckham would never play again for the Spanish giants.

Ronaldo, his appearances blighted first by injury and now by the fact the club want to get him off their books, with AC Milan apparently chasing the three-time World Player of the Year, is also now on the outside looking in.

"This is a decision not by the players but by the coach and the club. I can't say more than it's a luxury to leave out a player of this type (Ronaldo), but I'm sure they have their reasons," added Salgado.

Capello has turned his attention in the last month to new signings Gonzalo Higuain and Fernando Gago as Real bid to win a major title for the first time in four seasons.

The young Argentine pair arrived during the winter transfer window and have made an immediate impression, which will have heightened the discomfort of Beckham and Ronaldo, and the exit of the two 'galacticos' now seems imminent.

## Audacious Zidane bid

AFP, Chicago

French star Zinedine Zidane, whose legendary career ended with an infamous head-butt in last year's World Cup final, has received a comeback offer from the Chicago Fire, the Chicago Tribune reported.

Fire general manager John Guppy told the newspaper that his team and rivals from Major League Soccer have been in touch with the playmaker in hopes of luring him out of retirement, but all bids have been rejected.

"We reached out to Zidane," Guppy said. "But so has every other MLS club. The feedback we've all gotten is that he has retired."

Guppy said the Fire also made an offer to local product Brian McBride, a US World Cup standout who Guppy said will likely remain with Fulham of the English Premiership.

"We offered Brian a contract," Guppy said. "He said he would love to play in Chicago but needed to consider his options."

Guppy also said a bid also failed for Swedish forward Henrik Larsson, currently on loan with Manchester United.

The team is likely to look for a Polish or Mexican player to appeal to city ethnic groups that have been major supporters of the Fire.

## German sponsor for Real?

AFP, Madrid

German energy giant EON, already seeking an entry into the Spanish market with an ongoing takeover bid for Endesa, may open another Spanish door by sponsoring Real Madrid, Marca sports daily and broadcaster La Sexta said on Wednesday, without giving a source.

Real chairman Ramon Calderon said Monday that the club were "on the point of signing" a sizeable deal following the insolvency of previous sponsor and mobile phone maker BenQ Mobile, the failed German arm of Taiwanese electronics maker BenQ.

BenQ Mobile have sponsored Real since 2005 in a deal which had been due to run to 2010 and bring Real revenue of 20 million euros (26 million dollars). EON previously sponsored German former European champions Borussia Dortmund.

# Shevchenko targets Cardiff

## Football

AFP, London

Andriy Shevchenko has finally rediscovered his scoring touch but he won't be content until he has savoured success at the Millennium Stadium.

Shevchenko netted twice in Chelsea's 4-0 League Cup semifinal second leg win against Wycombe on Tuesday to help his side book a place in next month's final in Cardiff against Tottenham or Arsenal.

But the former AC Milan striker, whose goals against Wycombe were his first in 10 matches, will have mixed emotions when he travels to the Welsh capital.

Shevchenko has scored in both his previous matches at the Millennium Stadium, but has not finished on the winning side.

He was on target for Ukraine in a drawn 2001 World Cup qualifier against Wales and then claimed his first goal for Chelsea at the same venue in their 2-1 Community Shield defeat against Liverpool in August.

Shevchenko said: "I have scored in my last two visits to Cardiff but I have yet to win there. It is important that if I score we get the right result."

"The stadium has been good for me, but not for my teams. Still, my

confidence will be high when I play there in the final."

Shevchenko has endured a miserable time since his pre-season move to the English champions.

His failure to reproduce the form he showed with Milan led to him being dropped by Jose Mourinho amid repeated reports that he had been signed by his friend Roman Abramovich, the club's billionaire owner, rather than the Chelsea manager.

But Shevchenko looked more like his old self against Wycombe and his hard-working display earned praise from Mourinho just four days after the Portuguese coach had pointedly ignored him as he walked off the pitch after Chelsea's defeat at Liverpool. Shevchenko insists there is no rift with Mourinho and said: "It is a joyful time. I have scored goals and feel happy to have helped my team."

"I never lost my belief but goals are important to belief and then the confidence comes."

"The fans have supported me and I am glad to have given them something to celebrate."

"He (Mourinho) is a different manager and he has a different philosophy, but as for Saturday, nothing happened between us and I do not want to talk about that. I just want to talk about scoring goals."

Mourinho added: "He needs

happiness and I think this game can give him a bit of that."

"The process (of adapting to Chelsea) was a frustration for everybody. Especially for him and also for me."

"For him because he wants to perform and give everything for the team and for me because I wait for more and in some matches he was a bit frustrating."

Mourinho's own future remains uncertain but, publicly at least, he maintains that Abramovich's decision to turn down his repeated requests for a new defender will not affect his situation at Stamford Bridge.

"I keep saying the support (of Abramovich) has no relation to no signings," he said.

"I worked for Leira in Portugal where we had no money to pay the salaries on time. So it is not about money."

"Also Ricardo (Carvalho) is back and John Terry trained with the players for the first time on Monday."

"So if JT is coming and Ricardo is back, it is not so dramatic as it was one month ago. One month ago is much more difficult than it is now. That is why we don't need a new player so desperately as we did two or three weeks ago."

"If we have a little bit of luck with no more injuries, I think we can do it without any more players."

## COPPA ITALIA

# Inter unstoppable

## Football

INTERNET, undated

Inter's astonishing form continued with a comfortable 3-0 victory at Sampdoria on Wednesday that has all but booked their third straight Coppa Italia final.

The first leg of the semifinal at Marassi saw Roberto Mancini face the club he represented for most of his playing career, but Samp were without Parola, Sergio Volpi, Giulio Falcone, Gianluca Berti, Luca Castellazzi, Cristian Terlizzi and the suspended Ruben Olivera.

The Blucerchiati had a promising start with Francesco Flachi pouncing on an Olivier Dacourt back pass, then from a corner kick there were protests for an Ivan Cordoba handling offence.

However, the Nerazzurri broke through after just nine minutes when Luis Figo's free-kick from 35

metres was re-directed into the net by Nicolas Andre Burdisso.

Mancio's men are nothing if not clinical and following chances for Figo and Santiago Solari, another set-piece allowed them to double their lead. Figo's corner kick was charged down, but as the move continued the Portuguese legend floated in a cross for Hernan Crespo's header.

Despite conceding two 'away' goals in the opening half-hour, Sampdoria did not give in. Fabio Quagliarella burst into the box on Gennaro Del Vecchio's assist and brought a tough save out of Francesco Toldo -- standing in for Julio Cesar due to a back problem.

Flachi and Quagliarella continued to test the ex-Fiorentina goalkeeper's reflexes with a series of combinations and shots, while he also fumbled an Emiliano Bonazzoli header.

In the second half, Walter Novellino scrapped his tactical

system and returned to the 4-4-2 with Quagliarella as a forward. Inter still had the best chances with Solari creating an opportunity that Crespo ballooned over the bar from close range.

The Nerazzurri put the tie beyond doubt before the hour mark, again from a dead-ball situation, as Burdisso rose to nod in a corner kick for his second of the game.

Quagliarella has been linked with moves to both Milan and Napoli, his header bringing a great save from Toldo, who flew to tip it out from under the crossbar.

Julio Cruz made his comeback from injury and had a good opportunity charged down from a Javier Zanetti assist.

With a 3-0 away victory after the first leg, it's unlikely Inter can throw away their shot at a third consecutive Coppa Italia Final. The other semi was between Milan and Roma on Thursday.