



PHOTO: AFP  
Newcastle forward Anthony Sibierski (L) celebrates with teammates Kiernon Dyer (C) and Obafemi Martins after scoring the third goal in their victory over Zulte Waregem in their UEFA Cup match on Thursday.

## Nigerian clubs sanctioned

AFP, Lagos

The Nigeria Football League (NFL) has ordered champions Ocean Boys to play two home games behind closed doors while another top club Wikki Tourists were banished from their home ground and fined as a result of crowd trouble.Ocean Boys were sanctioned following the unruly behaviour of their fans during their premier league tie against Enugu Rangers, officials announced.

Wikki, on the other hand, will now play their home games in Akure till the end of the season, as well as pay a fine of 500,000 naira (about 4,000 US dollars) following crowd incident at their home game against Niger Tornadoes.

The Nigerian league season has reached the half way mark with Rangers top of Group A of the competition while two-time African champions Enyimba lead Group B. Rangers have recorded 18 points from nine matches while Enyimba have 15 points from eight matches.

The top two teams from each group will play off for the championship in April.

## Neville slams agents



AFP, London

Manchester United captain Gary Neville said Thursday he wanted player agents kicked out of football, insisting he did not know any good ones.

The work of agents in football has been a source of contention for some time, with many arguing they charge excessive fees when negotiating their clients' contracts and also try to unsettle players by encouraging them to make transfer requests so they can make yet more money.

"I'd like to see the removal of agents from the game - make players not so reliant on them," Neville told Sky Sports.

"We've got the PFA (Professional Footballers Association, the 'union' for English footballers) and they want to give, not take," he added.

Asked if there were any good agents at all within football, the England right-back replied: "I don't know many. There is a concern for me, and it always has been.

"One guy can go in (to a deal) and expect to be giving hundreds of thousands or, in this day and age, even millions (to an agent) - and that money is going out of the game.

"The clubs should keep that money - or, if they're earning it, the players."

Neville said the change he wanted would only come about if players took greater control of their own affairs.

"It won't change until players become more responsible for their actions," Neville said. "They think they need them (agents) - but it's not the case.

"They need good advice and good accountants - but they don't need people taking hundreds of thousands off them."

Gordon Taylor, the PFA chief executive, gave qualified support to Neville's position.

"Gary always speaks his mind. He speaks as he finds - and he is entitled to his opinion.

"It's one of the reasons why the PFA have always been keen to make clear to our members that we've the best experience in the world - and we're happy to help

them all with contracts and negotiations.

"That's what we're about - but having said that, there are a number of players who have agents we work with on different issues."

However, Taylor agreed with Neville's view that some agents do not always act in the best interests of those they represent.

"I worry they trawl their nets too wide sometimes for youngsters in the hope they can pick one up - and then don't give enough care.

"Of the 600 youngsters who enter the game at 16, five out of six will be out of it by the time they are 21.

"So I'll be interested to see how many agents help young players to get through university, or job re-training, or look after their operations in later years," Taylor added.

"Obviously there are players who need a 24-hour service, and that is not always possible for us to provide - because we do have 4,000 members.

"But certainly that side of affairs is developing and building up (within the PFA)."

## Germans sign sponsorship deal

AFP, Berlin

German telecommunications operator Deutsche Telekom said on Thursday they would be continuing their sponsorship of the Bundesliga until 2009 but the league would not take the company's name.

Deutsche Telekom started their sponsorship this season but have now taken up their option of a two-year extension.

The company name will continue to adorn the shirts of first and second division teams as well as on the giant screens in the stadiums, a statement said, adding the actual league would not be renamed though press had speculated it would be called the T-Liga or Telekom-Liga.

## Thailand to play Netherlands

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand will play the Netherlands here in June as a warm-up for the Asian Cup, the country's football association said Friday.

"We think that it's a good opportunity to warm up our team before we host the Asian Cup in July," said Chaipak Siriwat, chairman of the association.

No exact date was given but Chaipak said the match would take place in early June.

Thailand are co-hosts of the July 7-29 tournament along with Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia.

## Brawl in Chinese match

AFP, Beijing

A friendly match involving one of China's top football teams was abandoned after a mass brawl, state media said Friday, just days after a similar incident marred a Chinese visit to London.

Eight-time Chinese champions Dalian Shide were losing 3-0 to second-division side Chongqing Lifan when the fight erupted after a tackle on Dalian's Bulgarian import Zoran Jankovic.

"It's like you weren't even aware of the fight with the Olympic team," Dalian's Dutch coach Jo Bonfrere screamed at his players afterwards, according to the Dalian Evening News.

"Do you think you are acting honourably?"

After the match, which was not open to the public, Dalian immediately left Chongqing and returned home to the nation's northeast, the paper said.

Chinese football is in the spotlight since the notorious punch-up between the national under-23 team, which will represent China at the Beijing Olympics, during a match with England's QPR this month.

Both China and QPR apologised and handed out punishments after pictures of up to 30 players and coaches kicking and punching each other were broadcast worldwide.

# Old foes for Gunners, Red Devils

AFP, London



Arsenal and Manchester United will find a pair of familiar faces standing in their path towards the last eight of the FA Cup this weekend.

While Gunners old boy David Bentley returns to north London with Blackburn, Reading's trip to Old Trafford means a reunion for their Irish midfielder Stephen Hunt with his boyhood friend John O'Shea, the United defender.

As well as putting him in contention for promotion to the full England squad, Bentley's form of late has been good enough to suggest that, for once, Arsene Wenger's judgement may have let him down when he decided to allow the winger to leave the club that had fostered his talent.

First-team opportunities at Arsenal were thin on the ground for Bentley when he requested a transfer in the summer of 2005.

But his development since then has done nothing to dispel the belief that, had he stayed in London, the 22-year-old Bentley might have been that rare thing -- a young English footballer good enough for Wenger's starting line-up.

Bentley's new team-mates certainly have no doubt about the former England under-18 captain's technical ability.

"We have many quality players at Blackburn but David is something special," said Shabani Nonda, the DR Congo striker whose time at Monaco and Roma leaves him well-placed to judge.

"I call him 'our Beckham'. No two players are the same but there is a bit of Beckham about him, the way

he crosses the ball and the style he possesses."

Blackburn will relish their tilt at an Arsenal side that will have had barely 60 hours recovery time after being forced to extra-time in their fourth round replay at Bolton on Wednesday.

Wenger, who rested Thierry Henry on Wednesday, must also weigh his options for a Champions League clash against PSV Eindhoven in Holland on Tuesday, but is confident that an extension of his side's 11-match unbeaten run will mitigate against tired legs.

"The fatigue factor is important but as long as you win you hope you can recover," said the Frenchman. "The team has been doing really well recently and the spirit has been exceptional."

Hunt and O'Shea, who grew up together in Waterford, have both hit the headlines this season; Hunt for the horrific collision that left Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech with a fractured skull and O'Shea for his spell in goal for United following an injury to Edwin van der Sar in a recent Premiership match.

"We met up recently with the Ireland squad but we didn't really discuss this FA Cup game - most of the banter was about him going in goal," revealed Hunt.

"It would be nice if it happened again so I could score against him, although I don't suppose that is very realistic. We know its going to be

FIXTURES	
<b>Saturday</b>	Arsenal v Blackburn (1230 GMT), Chelsea v Norwich, Watford v Ipswich, Plymouth v Derby, Middlesbrough v West Brom, Manchester United v Reading (1715 GMT)
<b>Sunday</b>	Preston v Manchester City (1315 GMT), Fulham v Tottenham (1600 GMT)



PHOTO: INTERNET  
Chelsea striker Andriy Shevchenko walks during a training session at the club's training ground in Cobham on Thursday.

# Slomka's Schalke looking up

AFP, Berlin



Bundesliga leaders Schalke 04 have rewarded their coach Mirko Slomka with the offer of a new contract and will hope that is just the boost

required to extend their unbeaten run to 13 when they travel to VfL Wolfsburg this weekend.

The 39-year-old's contract was due to expire in June but the new deal would link the coach to the Gelsenkirchen outfit - who are on a run of six successive victories - till the end of the 2008/09 season.

Club general manager Andeas Muller met Slomka - who took over from Ralf Rangnick in January 2006 - late on Wednesday to talk about his future and said he was confident that there would be no hitches.

"We have agreed a deal at every level and will terminate these discussions in the next two or three weeks, but I do not see anything which would prevent him signing a new contract," said Muller.

This continues the seemingly unending good news for the 1997 UEFA Cup winners, as they sit six points clear of second-placed Werder Bremen and, more significantly, 11 points in front of Bayern Munich in fourth.

Slomka, who was formerly in charge of the club's youth system, is taking nothing for granted as Schalke seek their eighth title but first since 1958.

"We're happy to be six points

clear," he told the club website.

"But while we have the quality to win the league, there are another 13 games left, not two.

"We're hoping to have lots of support in Wolfsburg on Saturday. It's going to be another very difficult game because Wolfsburg are having a good spell.

"But we'll be looking to maintain our lead there and if possible even extend it. We want to carry on winning."

Schalke midfielder Fabian Ernst was cautious in his outlook for forthcoming matches.

"I don't really care what the table says," said Ernst. "We aren't dreaming. If anything, we need to be careful and keep our feet on the ground."

A view shared by midfielder partner Zlatan Bajramovic.

"I'm not letting it get to me. There are three months to go until the end of the season and so much can happen before then."

Royal Blues captain Marcelo Bordon was more positive.

"We are stronger than in 2005," referring to the team which

FIXTURES	
<b>Saturday</b>	Alemannia Aachen v Bayern Munich, Werder Bremen v Hamburg SV, VfL Wolfsburg v Schalke 04, Borussia Dortmund v Borussia Monchengladbach, Hertha Berlin v Mainz 05, Bayer Leverkusen v Hannover
<b>Sunday</b>	Arminia Bielefeld v VfL Bochum, Nuremberg v Energie Cottbus

tough because United are playing with all guns blazing at the moment but hopefully we can give a good account of ourselves."

Plymouth's home draw against Championship leaders Derby means at least one side from outside the top flight is guaranteed to reach the last eight, although the odds on the winner being joined by Norwich, who face a daunting trip to Chelsea, would appear slim.

Ipswich and West Brom will travel to Watford and Middlesbrough respectively with higher hopes, but it is perhaps Sunday's meeting between Championship high-flyers Preston North End and a Manchester City side that has struggled for goals of late that has the greatest potential for an upset.

It is also an encounter imbued with the history of the world's oldest competition.

The two clubs have been crossing swords in the FA Cup since the 1890s, a time when North End were one of the great powers in the land. It is 59 years since they last met in the Cup however and Preston fans will gladly settle for a repeat of the outcome of that day: their Scots centre-forward Billy McIntosh having scored the only goal at Maine Road in February 1948.

Sunday also sees a London derby clash between Fulham and Tottenham. Woefully inconsistent in the league this season, Martin Jol's Spurs remain capable of matching the country's best on their day and the under-pressure manager could badly do with the distraction of a quarter-final tie to look forward to.

Fulham's home form however suggests it might take a replay for that objective to be achieved.

