

Essien backs Nations Cup switch

AFP, London

Chelsea's Ghana midfielder Michael Essien wants to see a change in the international calendar which would allow the African Nations Cup to move to a new date.

The next edition of the tournament, held every two years, will take place in Ghana in January 2008 and is the top prize in African football.

But it means around a month out of Premiership action for those picked, with Chelsea braced to lose Essien, Didier Drogba, Mikel John Obi and Salomon Kalou.

Essien believes that making it an out-of-season competition like the European Championships would have the support of players who do not want to miss a chunk of the Premier League campaign.

"If they can change it would be good for us, we the players and it would be good the clubs too," said Essien.

"You have to leave in January which is a difficult month for the club, but you have to leave and go and help your country. If they can change it would be good for us."

Boss Jose Mourinho has planned for the loss of his African players as Chelsea look to win the title back from Manchester United, although Essien and Drogba in particular have been seen as vital to their challenge.

Juve hit form

INTERNET, undated

Juventus put their pre-season back on track with a stunning 5-2 comeback win over Roma in a friendly in Cesena.

Mirko Vucinic and Philippe Mexes gave last season's Serie A runners-up Roma a 2-0 lead before a David Trezeguet brace and second half goals from Vincenzo Iaquinta, Alessandro Del Piero and Marcelo Zalayeta gave Juve victory.

Claudio Ranieri's Juve, promoted from Serie B last term following their demotion for match-fixing, had stuttered in their other friendlies and lost out to Internazionale in a mini-tournament on Wednesday also involving Napoli.

Their string of new signings finally gelled on Saturday to leave Roma fretting ahead of their Italian Super Cup clash with Inter on August 19. The Serie A season begins a week later.



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla goalkeeper Andres Palop (R) saves at the feet of Real Madrid captain Raul during their Spanish Super Cup first-leg encounter at the Sanchez Pizjuan stadium in Sevilla on Saturday.

Sevilla gain advantage

Football

AP, Madrid

Sevilla moved a step closer to adding another new trophy to its collection after Luis Fabiano's 28th-minute penalty gave them a 1-0 win over Real Madrid Saturday in the first leg of the Spanish Supercup.

Fabiano drove his shoulder-high shot into the left side of net as goalkeeper Iker Casillas dived the other way a minute after Madrid defender Sergio Ramos was penalized for bringing down forward Duda.

Copa del Rey winner Sevilla, which has never won the Supercup, will travel to Madrid for next Sunday's second leg of the annual competition, which pits the league champion against the cup winner.

Sevilla have won all four cup finals they have played in over the past two seasons, having successfully defended their UEFA Cup title, beating FC Barcelona in the European Supercup and won the Copa del Rey against Getafe in

June. They had won only four trophies in their history before then, all prior to 1948.

Madrid, who won a record 30th league title in June, played their first competitive match without David Beckham, who was on the field when Madrid won their seventh Supercup four years ago.

New Madrid coach Bernd Schuster was without league scoring leader Ruud van Nistelrooy, while Sevilla's leading scorer Frederic Kanoute was missing due to suspension.

Madrid started two new faces in defender Pepe and midfielder Javier Balboa, while Sevilla started newcomers Khalid Boulahrouz and Seydou Keta.

Madrid's defense showed jitters early with Casillas having to dive to deny Luis Fabiano's low shot in the third minute after the Brazilian had latched on to a long through ball from Boulahrouz. A minute earlier, Duda watched his free kick from just outside the area sail high over the crossbar.

In the ninth, Raul Gonzalez wriggled the ball from Boulahrouz

and created space in the area only for Sevilla goalkeeper Andres Palop to charge off his line and finger the ball away.

Sevilla built on the momentum from its goal, with Casillas denying Duda in the 38th after a giveaway by Jose Maria "Guti" Gutierrez. Fabiano also had an overhead attempt in the 45th that just missed.

Looking to invigorate the offence, Schuster brought on Julio Baptista and Javier Saviola in the second half, but Madrid failed to threaten until injury time when Palop dived to push Mahamadou Diarra's low drive from sneaking inside the right post.

Before the second leg at the Santiago Bernabeu next week, Sevilla will host AEK Athens in the first leg of its European Champions League qualifying match Wednesday.

Fergie has faith in Heinze

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson insists he can still count on Gabriel Heinze even if the defender's bid to force a move to arch-rivals Liverpool fails.

Heinze goes to the Premier League for a ruling on August 20 after United refused to sanction a move to Anfield despite the player having a letter which stipulates he can leave if any club meets his 6.8 million pound (13.7m dollar) transfer fee.

United contend the letter, signed by chief executive David Gill, does not over-ride the Argentina defender's contract, which has two years to run.

"Gabriel Heinze has not become an alien within the squad at all. He is a very popular player within the club," said Ferguson.

"Obviously the meeting on August 20 will settle it one way or another. We think we have a good case. They probably think they have a good case too or they wouldn't have gone this far."

McCarthy out of hospital

AFP, Middlesbrough

Blackburn Rovers' South Africa striker Benni McCarthy was released from hospital Saturday after collapsing on the pitch during his side's 2-1 win over Middlesbrough at the Riverside.

The forward clashed heads with Boro defender Chris Riggott during a second-half challenge. Rovers were 1-0 down at the time.

McCarthy then collapsed as he spoke with Blackburn's physio.

After several minutes of treatment on the pitch, the striker was stretchered off wearing a neck brace and taken to hospital.

He was replaced by Paraguay striker Roque Santa Cruz in the 60th minute.

"Benni looks to be OK. He went to hospital but he's out now and will travel home with the team," a Blackburn spokesman said.

Rovers manager Mark Hughes added: "We got word when we were in the dressing room that he is OK."

"There was a concern when he went off -- after the initial impact he was able just to walk off and then he passed out."

"There was genuine concern at seeing a player being taken off on a stretcher with his neck in a brace."

Toni gamble pays off

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld admitted on Sunday he was relieved his gamble to risk the fitness of striker Luca Toni paid off as the Italian star scored in their 3-0 victory over Hansa Rostock.

Bayern's new 23 million-euro (31.4 million-dollar) strikeforce gave their employers an instant return as Toni netted, before German striker Miroslav Klose, a 12-million-euro signing from Werder Bremen, scored twice in Saturday's second-half.

The German giants's 69 million euros summer spending spree was rewarded after just 14 minutes as Klose drew the Hansa goalkeeper for Toni, who signed from Fiorentina for 11 million euros, to knock the ball into an empty net.

Hitzfeld admitted he took a big gamble to play Toni, 30, who damaged knee ligaments in a pre-season game last month and only trained with the Bayern team last Thursday.

"I am pleased that the risk came off to play Luca Toni," said Hitzfeld. "I thought about it long and hard

before I selected him.

"He only trained two weeks ago after recovering from his knee injury and he only trained with the team for the first time on Thursday.

"I thought he might struggle, but he blended in well and was strong.

"He is a big man who can block and present the ball very skillfully.

"I could see that his presence let Klose play his own game, so the risk was worthwhile."

Bayern's 4-3 win on penalties over third-division minnows Wacker Burghausen in the first round of the German Cup the week before had been the perfect wake-up call and Hitzfeld was pleased his side were fired up.

"I think we made a good start against Rostock," said Hitzfeld.

"We had a warning at Burghausen when we saw it can be so easy to lose if you don't concentrate properly and Rostock have won three times at Munich.

"That really motivated the team and focused minds, so we started very well.

"We deserved the 1-0 lead at half-time, but Rostock had four or five chances to counter-attack, which they did not finish.

"The fact they had chances did not please me at all and that is something

AFP, Bolton



Newcastle manager Sam Allardyce made a winning return to Bolton then launched a fierce attack on Phil Gartside, his former chairman at the Reebok Stadium.

Gartside suggested shortly before the match that Allardyce's departure from Bolton near the end of last season came at the right time because the fans had become bored with his team's direct style of football.

So Allardyce had every reason to enjoy Newcastle's excellent performance as they started the season with a 3-1 win against a team now managed by his former assistant Sammy Lee.

It is not the first time this summer that Gartside has criticised Allardyce, who said: "If that's what he thinks, then I don't know why."

"He has been saying an awful lot about Sam Allardyce since I left, but I have left this club in a very healthy state - the best it has ever been.

"He hasn't moved on, but I've moved on and left a great platform for Bolton. I don't know why he's so angry,

but that's life.

"I've been disappointed with a lot of the comments he's made, but my actions speak louder than words.

"I've kept my mouth shut and now we've come here and played them off the park and that says everything for me. I'm looking forward, not back, and I want to improve Newcastle."

Charles N'Zogbia opened the scoring for Newcastle in the 27th minute before an Obefemi Martins double put Allardyce on the road to victory before half-time.

Allardyce has been keen to launch a complete overhaul of his squad and he believes he is moving in the right direction.

"We are 40 per cent towards where I want to be," he said. "There's another 60 per cent to go. I've got to buy time to get there and I can only do that by winning matches.

"That's why this is a great start for us. It's been a great day for me, bringing a new team back to my old club. I certainly felt a bit more edgy and nervous before the game.

"I hoped my players would go over the white line and produce committed and quality football, and that happened in a very good first 45 minutes when we killed off the opposition stone

we have to work on.

"We let them have far too much free space after our attacks and we were badly organised, that is something we have to improve.

"Things weren't so simple for us after the break, the 2-0 lead came late in the game, but our defence was very strong.

"People will talk about our forwards, but our defenders all played well and contributed to the attacks.

"Ze Roberto and Mark van Bommel did well in midfield."

Hitzfeld reserved special praise for French midfielder Franck Ribery who was dynamic in attack and battled for every scrap of possession he could get his boot on.

Having injured a knee in Bayern's successful German League Cup campaign, Hitzfeld pulled his 26-million-euro signing off in the second-half to preserve him for this week's games against Barcelona and Werder Bremen.

"Franck is a constant source of energy and covers every blade of grass, he is aggressive and he did well before we pulled him off in the second-half, he was feeling the effects of his leg injury and I didn't want him to aggravate it."

dead.

"It was about seeing the game out in the second half and we did it extremely well apart from the slip-up when they scored their goal."

Nicolas Anelka claimed Bolton's consolation goal in the 50th minute of a second-half which gave Lee some encouragement.

The Bolton manager said: "I was disappointed by the result, but if I can take any positive from the game it came in the response I got in the second-half.

"If we hadn't got that response, I would be even angrier than I am at the moment.

"We just didn't start the game and I can't explain it, but I will be looking for reasons why it happened."

Bolton's players were unhappy that they were not awarded a penalty when Newcastle led 2-0, although Lee said: "You can have ifs and buts, but that doesn't disguise the fact we were 3-0 down at an early stage and hadn't started to play."