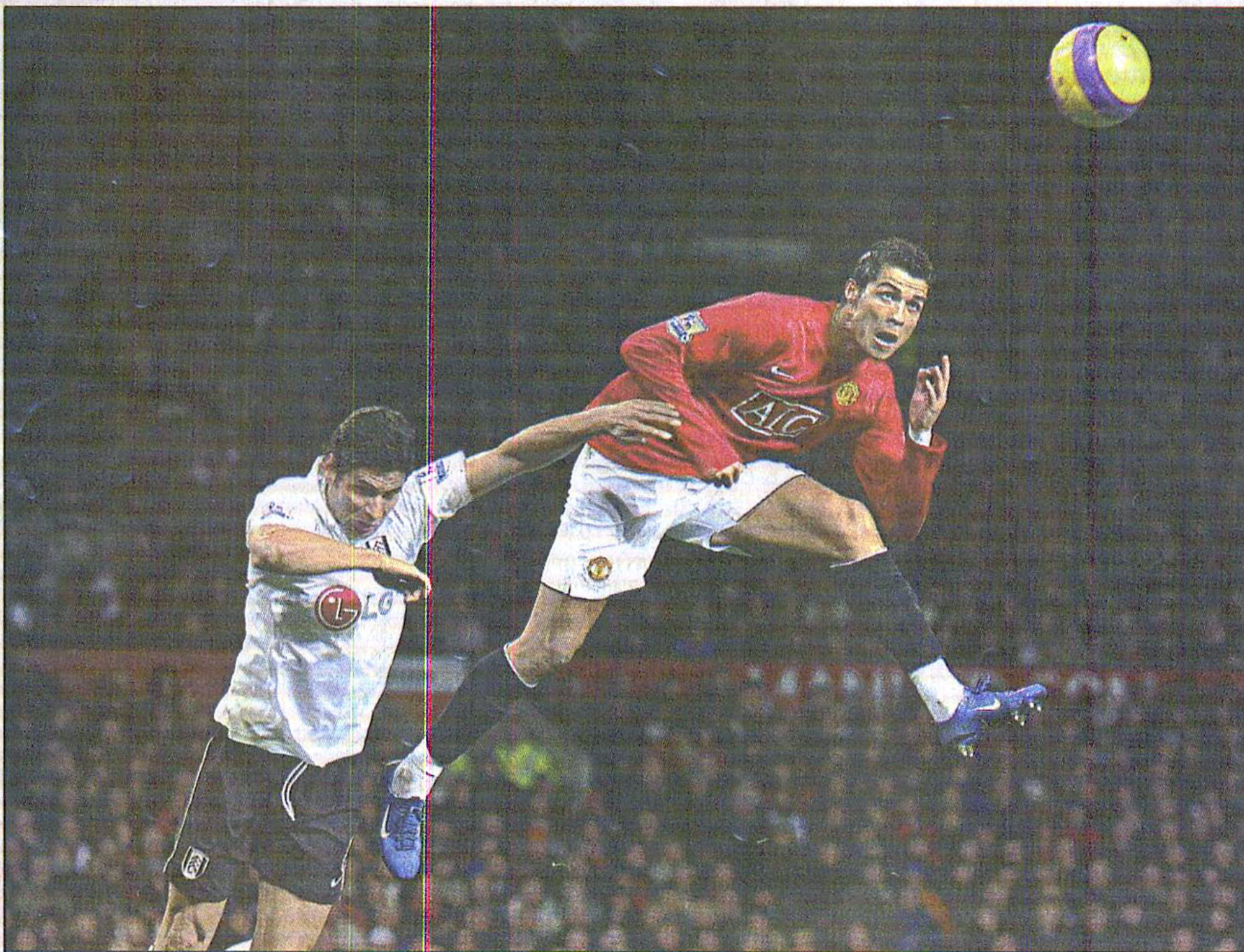




Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo (R) rises above Fulham defender Dejan Stefanovic as he heads his second goal during their Premiership match at Old Trafford on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Okada accepts Japan offer

REUTERS, Tokyo

Takeshi Okada will be named Japanese national team coach after accepting an offer to return to the post, the Japan Football Association (JFA) said on Tuesday. The 51-year-old will be appointed on Friday. He replaces Bosnian Ivica Osim, who is recovering from stroke. Senior members of the JFA met on Monday and unanimously approved Okada's appointment. The executive board will meet on Friday to formally endorse the decision, a JFA spokeswoman said. "It was decided that (Okada) should be the coach," the spokeswoman said of Monday's meeting. Okada first took charge of Japan in 1997, salvaging the side's qualifying campaign for the World Cup finals in France the following year after Shu Kamo was fired. But Japan's first World Cup finals appearance ended in three consecutive defeats and Okada was replaced by Frenchman Philippe Troussier. Since then Okada has managed J-League clubs Consadole Sapporo and Yokohama F-Marineros. Osim, who took the helm of Japan after the team's 2006 World Cup flop under Brazilian Zico, has begun to regain consciousness but the 66-year-old remains in intensive care.

Eto'o given all-clear

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o has received the all-clear to resume playing after three months out injured and could return in this Sunday's league match against Deportivo La Coruna, the Catalan club announced. "Samuel Eto'o received the green light this morning from doctors and can therefore be available to (coach) Frank Rijkaard for the last four matches of 2007," it said on its Internet site. The prolific Cameroon forward, who was the Spanish first division's top scorer two seasons ago, only played in one league game this season before rupturing a tendon in a friendly match with Inter Milan in late August. He resumed team training on November 25. It was the second long-term injury that the 26-year-old former African Player of the Year has suffered since moving to Barcelona three seasons ago. Last season, Eto'o was out for four months with a knee injury and some pundits believe his absence was instrumental in Barca having to relinquish the La Liga title they had won for the previous two years. He was also a goal scorer in Barca's 2-1 win over Arsenal in the 2006 European Champions League final. In Eto'o's absence, Argentine striker Lionel Messi has taken over the role of being Barca's principal

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MU ride on Ronaldo

AFP, Manchester

Cristiano Ronaldo made up for missing out on the European Footballer of the Year award by scoring both goals as Manchester United moved to within three points of leaders Arsenal with a 2-0 win against Fulham at Old Trafford on Monday. Ronaldo, who was overlooked in favour of AC Milan's Brazilian forward Kaka for the Ballon d'Or award that was announced on Sunday, proved too good for Fulham, who saw their woeful Premiership away record stretch to 24 games without victory as Sir Alex Ferguson's team cruised to the win. United had allowed themselves to fall off the Premiership pace by losing 1-0 at Bolton in their last league outing and nothing but three points against Fulham would do for the champions with Arsenal stretching their lead to six points with a week-end victory at Aston Villa. Manager Ferguson had made the point in his match programme notes that further slip-ups would not be tolerated and the message appeared to have hit home loud and clear as United tore at Fulham inside the opening ten minutes. Argentine striker Carlos Tevez should have hit a hat-trick during

that period as three golden chances fell into his path, but the former West Ham forward failed to take any of them. Tevez first let Fulham off the hook when he headed Anderson's cross wide from three yards after beating the offside trap to take his chance at the far post. Moments later, he was then denied by a brilliant save from goalkeeper Antti Niemi, who dived low to block Tevez's snapshot from 12 yards. His luck clearly wasn't in and Tevez had another near miss on eight minutes when his right foot strike from the edge of the penalty area was deflected over the crossbar by Fulham captain Aaron Hughes. Where Tevez was wasteful, however, Ronaldo was lethal and the Portuguese international gave United the lead on ten minutes with a thunderous volley that left Niemi completely helpless. On this occasion, poor defending by Fulham unlocked the door for United. Lawrie Sanchez's team failed to properly clear Ryan Giggs's corner and the ball ultimately fell to Ronaldo on the edge of the six yard box after a flick-on from defender Nemanja Vidic. Unmarked, Ronaldo simply lashed a right-foot volley into the roof of the net to put United ahead and claim his twelfth goal of the season. That should have been the start of a goal avalanche, but Fulham

managed to stifle United and they even went close to levelling the scores before the break when former Liverpool midfielder Danny Murphy forced keeper Edwin van der Sar into action with a well-struck effort from 20 yards. Fulham never looked like dragging themselves level, though, and United merely needed to find a second goal to put the game beyond the Londoners. It took a while in coming, however, as the chances dried up following the lightning start. Sanchez's team could not hold out until the end of the game, though, and Ronaldo doubled United's lead when he headed in John O'Shea's cross from close range on 58 minutes. A stunning volley in one half and a centre-forward's header the next. There is little that Ronaldo cannot produce and Ferguson's assertion that the 22-year-old is one of the world's best players is difficult to contest. Ronaldo would have scored a hat-trick as well but for a bizarre penalty incident on 79 minutes. Seemingly fouled by Niemi 12 yards out, referee Rob Styles refused the appeals and booked the United star for diving! Why he would go down with an open goal at his mercy is one for Styles to explain, but it was certainly one of the more ridiculous decisions of the season.

Newcastle await Arsenal

AFP, Newcastle

Shay Given has insisted that Newcastle United manager Sam Allardyce is not facing a player revolt after a run of poor results has led to increasing speculation over the former Bolton boss's long-term future with the north-east club. Republic of Ireland goalkeeper Given has issued a strongly-worded statement which claims Allardyce has the full support of the squad, despite pressure mounting after a run of just one point from the last possible 15 ahead of Wednesday night's visit by unbeaten Premier League leaders Arsenal. Given has played down talk of major rifts over tactics, midfielder Geremi's position as captain and the manager's unpopular plans to take the squad away over the festive period. In a joint statement issued with goalkeeper Steve Harper, a fellow senior player, Given said: "Sam Allardyce has the full backing and support of every Newcastle United player and we're working together as one to bring success to the club. "At the club we have a player committee led by our captain Geremi, which also includes James

Milner, Mark Viduka and ourselves. Many issues are openly discussed between the players and the manager as is commonplace at any club. "Far from being player power this is sensible and constructive communication and a key part of the process of helping to build a stronger club." Allardyce will hope that level of support manifests itself on the pitch where the hosts are looking to bounce back after posting their worst back-to-back results at St James' Park in 77 years with the comprehensive defeats by Portsmouth and Liverpool last month. For all the feverish talk on Tyneside, Newcastle are still 11th in the table. But a combination of a large, passionate, fan base and a lack of major silverware for nearly four decades is not a recipe for patience. While Allardyce had plenty of injury worries of his own, his counterpart Arsene Wenger is worried that a growing casualty list could do serious damage to his team's Premier League title chances. Arsenal, who have won just once in their last half a dozen visits to Tyneside, will extend their lead at the top to six points with victory, but they will attempt to do so without a number of key players. Cesc Fabregas, Robin van Persie and Abou Diaby are all sidelined,

while Alexander Hleb is also doubtful after aggravating a hamstring injury in the 2-1 victory at Aston Villa at the weekend. Wenger said: "Alexander Hleb took a kick on his Achilles tendon at Aston Villa. He had a hamstring problem before that, but we decided to play him. But he had a little recurrence, and I am not sure he will be available for the Newcastle game. "My worry at the moment is that we seem to be losing players in every game. I can only hope that we get them back soon." However, Wenger has several options if the influential Hleb is unavailable. The Frenchman could decide to switch Tomas Rosicky, who played just behind lone forward Emmanuel Adebayor at Aston Villa, to the left wing, with Nicklas Bendtner partnering Adebayor in a 4-4-2 formation. The 18-year-old Theo Walcott is another player who could figure in the starting side in a bid to expose United's lack of pace in defence. Fabregas (hamstring) and Diaby (back) are approaching full fitness but are still not ready to play. That means former Chelsea player Lassana Diarra is likely to continue alongside Mathieu Flamini in central midfield. Van Persie, meanwhile, has been out of action since October due to a knee injury.

Krkic closer to debut

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona striker Bojan Krkic, who has shined in Spain's Under-21 side and the Catalan club, could debut on the full national team earlier than expected, Spain coach Luis Aragones said Tuesday. "It is possible that he will debut in the full team before it had been anticipated," he said in comments published in sports daily Marca. "Bojan has the conditions to be a great footballer but perhaps he is too young. We'll see." In October Krkic, 17, became Barcelona's youngest-ever goal scorer in a Spanish league match, contributing one goal in his side's 3-1 loss away to Villarreal. Krkic, who has a Serb father and Spanish mother, has said he wants to continue to play in Spain where he was born and raised but Serbian officials have expressed hope that he will one day change his mind. "Taking part in the European Championship? I would love it. If they called me, I would not think twice," he told reporters last month. Spain are in Group D in the Euro 2008 finals in Austria and Switzerland along with defending champions Greece, Sweden and Russia.

Malouda slams English game

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea winger Florent Malouda has hit out at England football, saying players do not use their brains during matches. The Frenchman also slammed footballers' diets and disparaged an excessive level of commitment in training. "Training sessions here are terrifying. They are just like matches, and you go flat out," he said. "During the actual games it is as though everybody's brains are switched off. "People play by instinct, spontaneously, in the way they did when they first discovered football. "The people at Chelsea don't control what the players eat. You can help yourself to whatever you like, drink Coke or anything. "It's a good job I have come over here at the age of 27 and so haven't been following the same diet as the rest of the club's players."

Erratum

We printed a picture in this page on Tuesday where the caption read Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard converting a spotkick against their Premiership rivals Bolton. Actually Gerrard was scoring from the spot against Porto at Anfield during a UEFA Champions League match on November 28. We regret the slip. -- Sports Editor

I'm innocent: C'Ron

INTERNET, undated



Cristiano Ronaldo has refused to condemn Rob Styles over the Old Trafford diving storm - but the Manchester United winger is certain the referee got it wrong. After scoring both United's goals in their 2-0 win over Fulham on Monday night, Ronaldo was denied an opportunity to complete his first Red Devils hat-trick when Styles ruled he dived over Cottagers keeper Antti Niemi as the pair went for Louis Saha's through ball. Instead of awarding United a penalty, Styles booked Ronaldo for gamesmanship, a decision TV replays later suggested was incorrect. Sir Alex Ferguson claimed Styles had been 'conned' by Niemi, who correctly asserted he had not touched Ronaldo, covering up the fact he had not touched the ball. But if the United man had not taken evasive action, he would almost certainly have been flattened. Ronaldo, runner-up to Kaka in the prestigious Ballon D'Or, was not quite as forceful as his manager, instead insisting it was simply

a bad call. "I try to do my job and I try to play honestly," he said. "I respect the referee's decision but I do not have the same opinion because I thought it was a penalty. "If you see the replay, the goalkeeper never touched the ball, so it is frustrating the referee gave me a yellow card." Ferguson felt Ronaldo had been the victim of a diving tag which was attached to the winger during his early days at United but which has gradually been lost amid his sublime form over the past 18 months. "His reputation from years ago is still playing on the minds of referees," said the United manager. "It is quite unfair because he is nothing like that now. He is more mature and a magnificent footballer. "Why would he want to go down? He was on a hat-trick, he had gone round the keeper and he was brought down. It was a ridiculous decision." Fulham boss Lawrie Sanchez was quick to defend Niemi, although he attempted to side-step the issue over whether Ronaldo had dived or should have been awarded a spot-kick. "Antti was trying to tell the referee he had not touched

Ronaldo - and he hadn't," said Sanchez. "Maybe if Ronaldo had dragged his feet he would have got a penalty but he didn't, he sprawled over him. Is that a penalty or not? I don't know. But if he had gone straight over the top he probably would have scored." Nevertheless, Ronaldo's double - his 11th for United - took his tally for the season to 13, just 10 behind last term's incredible total. It allowed United to jump back into second spot in the Barclays Premier League table, three points adrift of leaders Arsenal, who also have a game in hand. "I said at the start of the season that after finishing so far behind last year Arsenal and Liverpool wouldn't want that again," observed Ferguson, who confirmed both Patrice Evra and Rio Ferdinand had been forced off after a stomach virus hit the United camp this week. "We expected improvement from them both. Arsenal are doing very well, Liverpool are winning a few games and Chelsea's form since they lost to us has been very good. "I think you are going to get that now. It is going to be a real battle for the league."

Drogba's 'laser' attack probed

AFP, London



Police confirmed Monday they were investigating an incident that saw a spectator shine a green 'laser' beam into the face of Chelsea striker Didier Drogba during his side's 1-0 Premier League win at home to London rivals West Ham last weekend. The supporter in question has yet to be identified but a spokesman for London's Metropolitan Police said: "When the matter was brought to the attention of officials at the time it was not possible to identify the person or persons responsible. We will continue to try to identify them." Ivory Coast striker Drogba said after Sunday's match: "It's difficult as you see this green light. This is a stupid fan I think."

"The rest of the West Ham fans were good. I think they supported their team. That's what we want to see in the stadium, not these kind of things." Chelsea's win left them second in the table, five points behind leaders Arsenal and fellow London side Arsenal, lauded for their attacking play so far this season. But England midfielder Joe Cole, who scored Chelsea's winner against former club West Ham on Saturday, said grinding out a victory was just as important in winning a championship as producing beautiful football. "These are the sort of games that you have to win. We didn't play well, so it's a really important win for us. "There were a lot of tired legs but we came through in the end, a little bit of quality showed and we got a result. "A lot has happened at the club this year but we are showing great

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Jose on FA shortlist



THE GUARDIAN

Jose Mourinho is among at least four confirmed candidates on the Football Association's radar in its search for the next England manager. The former Chelsea manager, alongside Fabio Capello and Jurgen Klinsmann are known to be interested in the position and the FA is preparing to make contact with their representatives in due course. However, the governing body is refusing to be bounced into making an early decision and is still conducting a consultation exercise with leading figures in the game. High-profile individuals such as

the Italia 90 semifinalist manager, Sir Bobby Robson, are being canvassed but the feedback extends beyond who they believe should be England's next manager. The wise men are giving profiling advice as well as opinions on how to improve the FA's internal processes. Mourinho has prepared a detailed blueprint of his own but the FA is confident that all of the "world-class" candidates who are vying for the job have similarly detailed plans of their own. The FA's chief executive, Brian Barwick, and director of football development, Sir Trevor Brooking, are leading the search and not holding themselves to a fixed timetable over the appointment but sources stress daily progress is being made on the process.

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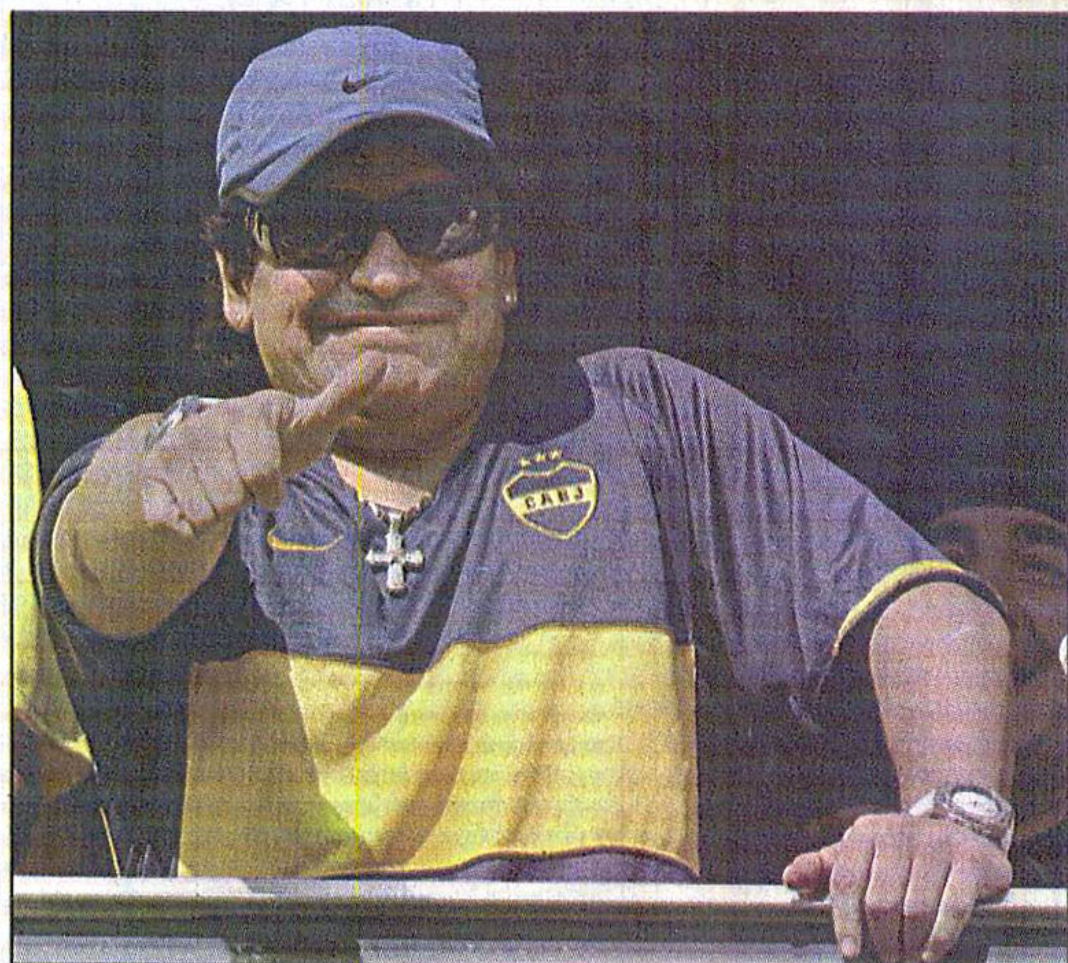


PHOTO: AFP

Argentina legend Diego Maradona, sporting a Boca Juniors jersey, gives a thumbs up to his team before the start of the Argentine First Division football match against Lanus at La Bombonera Stadium in Buenos Aires on Sunday.