



Inter Milan striker David Suazo (L) slots the ball past Lazio goalkeeper Ballotta to score during their Serie A encounter at the San Siro on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Inter on fire Roma keep pace

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan and AS Roma are threatening to disappear over the hill as Serie A's top two sides both won their games in hand on Wednesday.

Champions Inter trounced Lazio 3-0 at the San Siro here while Roma coasted to a 2-0 win over lowly Cagliari at Rome's Stadio Olimpico.

Inter lead Roma by three points with the capital club a further five points clear of everyone else after 14 matches.

The Italian league is looking more and more like a two-horse race, particularly with European champions AC Milan 16 points off the pace.

Inter coach Roberto Mancini was keen to play down the significance of the increasing gap.

"The difference between us and Roma is just the match between the two sides (Inter won 4-2 in Rome earlier in the season)," Mancini told Sky Sport.

"Roma are playing well and Inter and Roma are the best teams at this time. However, Juventus can come back because there is a lot of time left."

Lazio created the first chance as captain Luciano Zauri crossed from left to right where top scorer Goran Pandev was waiting unmarked.

He cracked a volley across goal and Stefano Mauri is inches away from turning the ball in at the far post.

But thereafter, Inter took control, although there was a touch of fortune about their opener.

Guglielmo Stendardo was harshly adjudged to have impeded Nicolas Burdisso and the referee pointed to the spot on 22 minutes. Zlatan Ibrahimovic stepped up, and the excitable Sweden forward smashed the ball home, high to goalkeeper Marco Ballotta's right.

Just past the half hour mark Inter had the ball in the net again but Honduran forward David Suazo's close range finish after Ballotta had parried young winger Pele's fierce long range shot, was rightly ruled offside.

Just two minutes later, though, Lazio hit the self-destruct button. Brazilian full-back Maicon arrived like a steam engine to meet Chilean midfielder Luis Jimenez's left-wing corner and unchallenged he blasted a volley home from inside the six-yard box.

Lazio coach Delio Rossi must have been tearing out what little hair he has left.

Ten minutes into the second period and Inter threatened to rack up a cricket score as Suazo latched onto a long ball from Argentina midfielder Esteban Cambiasso to coolly slot home under Ballotta.

Inter turned on the style and seemed to be playing for fun, with

Jimenez and Ibrahimovic at the heart of everything.

Inter did eventually take their foot off the gas and Lazio substitute Mourad Meghni and forward Tommaso Rocchi both forced Inter goalkeeper Julio Cesar into smart saves.

Argentina centre-back Walter Samuel had the ball in the net for the hosts in injury time but that too was ruled out for offside.

In Rome Francesco Totti made his return from injury to the Roma starting line-up but it was Brazilian midfielder Taddei who had things wrapped up by half-time.

On 28 minutes he headed home a free-kick from David Pizarro and eight minutes later he finished off a sweeping move involving Macedonia forward Mirko Vucinic and Brazilian winger Alessandro Mancini, whose shot was parried only for his compatriot to slot home the loose ball.

Taddei is determined that Roma won't make the same mistakes as last season when they finished runners up to Inter but gave away too many points against supposed lesser sides, something the champions didn't do.

"We need to concentrate on ourselves and not the others. We respect other teams but our aim is always to win," he said.

"Last season we lost important points. This season we can't make the same mistakes."

## Korea's hunt for coach

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea's search for a new head coach took another twist on Thursday after Gerard Houllier turned down the job.

The Korea Football Association (KFA) had said it was a straight choice between Houllier and Irishman Mick McCarthy to replace Dutchman Pim Verbeek as coach of the Asian powerhouse.

However, Wolverhampton Wanderers boss McCarthy rejected the KFA's approach on Wednesday and a deal to bring Frenchman Houllier to Seoul collapsed at the last minute.

"The negotiations broke off after we got to the final signing stage," KFA spokesman You Young-cheul said by telephone.

"Houllier had agreed on the deal but the French football association and his family were against it."

You said the KFA had prepared other options for such an eventuality and that a new head coach could still be named before the end of the week.

## Long lay-off for Drogba

Football

THE TIMES

Chelsea have been rocked by the news that Didier Drogba is facing a knee operation that could keep him out for several months. The Ivory Coast striker had a scan yesterday that revealed degeneration in his left meniscus, which requires surgery. A decision on whether to operate immediately or patch him up in the hope of getting him through the Christmas period will be made in the next few days.

Chelsea's medical staff will speak to the player and examine his performance in training today before advising Avram Grant, the first-team coach, of the best course of action, although if Drogba is deemed not fit enough to face Sunderland on Saturday they are likely to recommend an operation as soon as possible.

Although there is a temptation

to keep Drogba going with the aid of painkilling injections until January, when he will be unavailable because of the African Cup of Nations, the 29-year-old is unwilling to sacrifice his international ambitions in such a manner and the club's medical department do not want to risk his long-term health for the sake of a few Barclays Premier League appearances.

Drogba has been carrying the injury since he took a knock to the left knee while playing for Ivory Coast last month and a prolonged period of absence would be a huge blow for his club. Chelsea are heavily reliant on their leading scorer and failed to win any of the three matches he missed with a different knee injury in September, and they scored only one goal.

The minimum recovery period from knee surgery is between three and five weeks, not including the time necessary to regain match fitness, which would keep Drogba out until the African Cup of Nations

starts in January. Although Grant should be capable of masterminding a victory over Sunderland, tougher tests await, with Chelsea facing Arsenal on December 16 before potentially awkward Christmas fixtures against Blackburn Rovers, Aston Villa, Newcastle United and Fulham. Chelsea's failure to beat Villa and Fulham over the festive period last year effectively cost them the title.

Given Drogba's international commitments, it is conceivable that he may not play for Chelsea until February, although there could also be repercussions for his participation in the African Cup of Nations. The club are adamant that Drogba will not be permitted to complete any of his rehabilitation with Ivory Coast, who begin the tournament against Nigeria on January 21, and that he will be allowed to travel only if and when he is deemed match fit to play for Chelsea.

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## Ronaldinho 'unhappy'

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Brazilian play-maker Ronaldinho is finding the situation at the Spanish club "untenable", according to El Mundo newspaper on Thursday.

Quoting sources close to his brother and agent Roberto de Assis, El Mundo said Ronaldinho was unhappy at the Nou Camp this season, where he has fallen out of favour, especially since his reputation was damaged by highly-publicised reports of his nocturnal party lifestyle.

"It's been a long time that he has not been happy in Barcelona. He's not at ease in the dressing-room and is not ready to play the role of replacement," the daily quoted other sources close to the Brazilian as saying.

Ronaldinho was a replacement during Barca's last two matches, the 2-2 Champions League draw against Lyon and the 1-1 La Liga draw against Espanyol, playing just the final 20 minutes of each match.

"Players like Ronaldinho, it's not the coach who sits them on the replacements' bench, it's them who decide," Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard told Ona FM radio.

The Dutchman said it was up to Ronaldinho to show what a "great player he is, and he's going about that".

## Wolfsburg after Lehmann

AFP, Berlin

Felix Magath, coach of Bundesliga side VfL Wolfsburg, says he is interested in signing Arsenal's disgraced goalkeeper Jens Lehmann, it was revealed on Wednesday.

German international Lehmann has fallen out of favour at the north London club and hinted of a desire to leave the Premier League giants unless he wins back his first-team place.

Lehmann's position at Arsenal is looking less and less tenable after the German criticised both first-choice shot-stopper Spaniard Manuel Almunia and manager Arsene Wenger earlier this season.

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## Nancy snatch late draw

AFP, Paris

Second-placed Nancy moved to within five points of leaders Lyon after snatching a 1-1 draw against ten-man Toulouse in Wednesday's French league game.

Congolese midfielder Chris Malonga's equaliser in the final minute ensured Nancy deprived the hosts of their first win in six matches.

"We were bordering on the ridiculous, we made some bad choices," complained Nancy coach Pablo Correa, whose side suffered just their second loss of the season Saturday with their 2-1 reversal at Le Mans.

Swedish striker Johan Elmander, the author of a hat-trick in Sunday's 4-3 defeat at Bordeaux, opened after 18 minutes for Toulouse.

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## WORLD CLUB CUP Milan plot revenge

Football

AFP, Tokyo

AC Milan are raring to avenge Boca Juniors in the Club World Cup opening here on Friday with Ronaldo, back from injury, ready to join playmaker Kaka and fellow goal-machine Filippo Inzaghi.

Both Milan and Boca, Argentina's most crowned club who defeated the Italian side in the 2003 Intercontinental Cup final, have left behind disappointments in their home leagues to face other continental champions here.

Despite advancing to the Champions League knock-out rounds, Milan are currently languishing 11th in the Serie-A, while Boca have just lost the battle for the Argentine league title to Lanus.

"I have a burning desire to win the Club World Cup, especially with it being my second crack at this title," said Brazilian Kaka. "I haven't forgotten our defeat to Boca Juniors."

Boca midfielder Alvaro Gonzalez said: "It would be very nice to win this competition, especially to compensate people for the support they gave us when things didn't turn out well."

The annual tournament, in its third year under the current format, kicks off with a play-off between Iran's Sepahan and Waitakere United of New Zealand. Milan and Boca are seeded in the semifinals set for the middle of next week.

"This time, my teammates and I will be hugely motivated to see things work out right for us," the 25-year-old Kaka, who won France's prestigious Ballon d'Or award for best player of the year on Sunday, told FIFA.com.

Kaka admitted the Club World

Cup is seen as a "bonus" in Europe below the Champions League although it is the "most important title" in his native Brazil.

"Things are different this year," he said. "In brief, we're 100 per cent focused on the job in hand and we want that Cup."

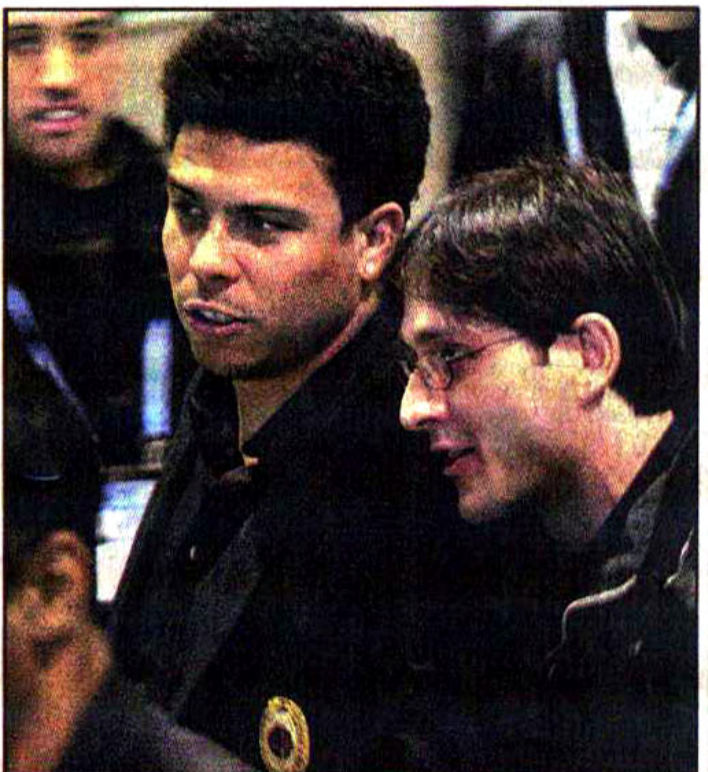
Europe's best have been shamed by Brazilian sides in the Club World Cup, which merged the traditional Intercontinental Cup featuring European and South American champions and a one-off club world championship in 2000. Sao Paulo smashed Liverpool 1-

0 in 2005 and Internacional whipped Barcelona by the same score last year. In the 2000 tournament, Corinthians beat fellow Brazilian side Vasco da Gama.

Boca coach Miguel Russo said before his team's departure for Tokyo that he could not wait for the Club World Cup "because I see that the team is in good shape."

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti added: "This World Cup is the main objective of the season. We'll try to bring home another Cup, to cap off a very positive year."

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Milan striker Ronaldo arrives at the Narita Airport in Tokyo on Thursday to participate in the World Club Cup to be held in Japan.

PHOTO: AFP

## Magpies hold Gunners

AFP, Newcastle



The latest wonder striker from Emmanuel Adebayor was not enough for an under-strength Arsenal to claim all three points as Newcastle hit back to secure a 1-1 draw with the unbeaten Premier League leaders.

Steven Taylor's second-half equaliser earned some valuable breathing space for the under-pressure Sam Allardyce after Newcastle fell behind to Adebayor's stunning early goal at St James' Park.

After the public vote of confidence issued by the players in the manager earlier this week, Allardyce's men have gone a long way to winning back the support of fans who had begun to question their side's commitment.

Despite being pegged back by Taylor's expertly-taken first goal of the season on the hour, Arsenal can still be satisfied with what could prove to be a valuable point at the end of the season.

It is one which stretches their advantage over their nearest challengers Manchester United to four points, after racking up a 22nd straight league game unbeaten, a run which dates back to April.

Newcastle couldn't have wished for a worse start as they found themselves behind inside four minutes against the depleted leaders, who were without five influential first team players

through injury.

The goal was of the hosts' own making as Charles N'Zogbia, again played out of position at left-back by Allardyce, and gave the ball away in a dangerous position on the corner of the Newcastle area.

Emmanuel Eboué accepted possession to swing in an inviting centre from Arsenal's right, which Adebayor controlled with his chest before volleying a fierce shot into the roof of the net from 12 yards to maintain Arsenal's record of scoring in every league game this season.

Newcastle spurned an opportunity to restore parity within 60 seconds as Obafemi Martins headed narrowly wide after rising to meet a James Milner cross eight yards out.

And it was the hosts who carved out the more meaningful chances

before the break, as Manuel Almunia was forced to save smartly on his line when Newcastle captain Geremi curled a low 25-yard free-kick round the wall.

Taylor came even closer to an equaliser 10 minutes before the interval, with a header from N'Zogbia's corner which the back-tracking Almunia palmed onto an upright.

Replays suggested strong appeals for handball by Lassana Diarra, in his efforts to complete the clearance from his station on the post, were unfounded.

Newcastle's persistence paid off when they deservedly drew level 15 minutes after the break.

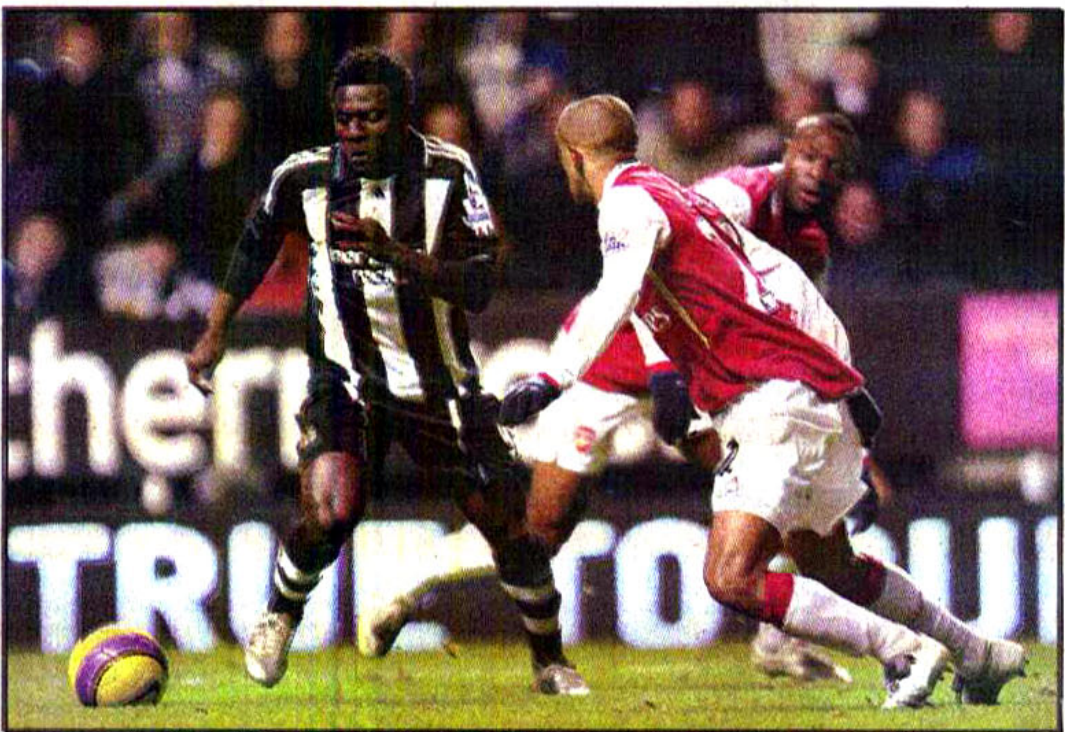
Joey Barton's tenacity enabled the midfielder to block Eduardo Da Silva's clearance, allowing full-

back Habib Beye to send over a dangerous cross from the right.

Alan Smith, arriving at the near post, applied an important flick which allowed the centre to reach Taylor, who beat Almunia with a low shot which went in off the post from 12 yards, leaving Arsenal with just one win in their last seven visits to Tyneside.

Newcastle dominated the remainder of the contest, but failed to create any further clear-cut chances as they were forced to keep numbers back to prevent Arsenal from hitting them on the break.

That almost happened at the death, and N'Zogbia, the last defender, was lucky to escape a red card as he hauled Adebayor down with the striker racing through on goal.



Newcastle striker Obafemi Martins (L) tries to accelerate away from Arsenal defender Gael Clichy during their Premiership clash at St James's Park on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP