



Sparta Prague winger Jan Rezek (R) skips the challenge of Bayer Leverkusen defender Manuel Friedrich during their UEFA Cup match at the BayArena on Thursday.

## Spurs, Bolton through

AFP, Paris



Tottenham reached the UEFA Cup last 32 on Thursday while Bolton virtually ensured their place but both sides were overshadowed by controversy.

Spurs, the champions in 1984, drew 1-1 with Anderlecht in Brussels in Group G with Bulgarian striker Dimitar Berbatov scoring from the penalty spot just two minutes after the Belgian side had gone ahead through Bart Goor.

It was Berbatov's 10th goal in 12 games in the UEFA Cup for the London side as coach Juande Ramos, who took Sevilla to two wins in the tournament, stayed on course for a third triumph.

However, Anderlecht look set to face the wrath of UEFA after cigarette lighters and even an iron bar

rained down on the pitch in the closing stages with makeshift Spurs defender Didier Zokora being hit on the head.

"I played four years in Belgium so maybe they hate me," said Zokora, a former Genk midfielder. Spurs assistant boss Gus Poyet admitted it was important to take something from the match.

On the missiles thrown onto the pitch, Poyet said: "I think it's not good for Anderlecht. It's nothing to do with Anderlecht, there are always a few people."

In Belgrade, Bolton rested star striker Nicolas Anelka, with one eye on Saturday's English Premiership relegation battle with Wigan, but it didn't prevent Gary Megson's side from registering a famous 1-0 win over Red Star.

The win put them on top of Group F and virtually assured a place in the last 32 with just one round of games to play.

Gavin McCann headed Bolton's winner on the stroke of half-time.

It was the former Aston Villa man's first goal for the club and it

came after Gary Speed had flicked on a corner from Andranik Teymourian.

The Premiership side had been outraged that hundreds of their fans had originally been prevented from making their way to the stadium.

Police held the supporters at the Hotel National in the Serbian capital amid security fears following trouble involving Red Star fans last weekend when a policeman was attacked with flares.

Bayer Leverkusen secured their place in the last 32 with a 1-0 win over Sparta Prague. Manuel Friedrich secured the win with a 71st-minute header.

The result also sent FC Zurich and Spartak Moscow through from Group E at the expense of Toulouse as well as the Czech champions.

Spartak Moscow moved to the top spot in the group with a 1-0 win over Zurich with Egor Titov scoring in the 57th minute.

Bordeaux beat Helsingborg 2-1 as the French side joined the Swedes in qualifying from Group H.

## Mourinho in England

THE GUARDIAN

Jose Mourinho flew into England yesterday, fuelling speculation that he is set for talks with the Football Association about the vacant England head coach's job.

The former Chelsea manager, who has prepared a blueprint detailing his plans for English football, arrived by private jet at Farnborough airport in Hampshire. The FA stressed that it had not held direct talks with any candidate about succeeding Steve McClaren but Mourinho is known to be on its shortlist.

The Portuguese would welcome discussions with the governing body to establish whether his plans, which include restarting the building of the National Football Centre at Burton, would be welcomed.

Other leading candidates to succeed McClaren include Fabio Capello, the former Real Madrid coach, Martin O'Neill is also highly regarded by the FA but he has said he wants to stay at Aston Villa and yesterday backed Mourinho. "I think Jose would be an excellent choice," he said.

The FA's chief executive, Brian Barwick, wants a "world-class" coach after McClaren's failure to qualify for Euro 2008. He has consulted leading figures such as Sir Alex Ferguson and Sir Bobby Robson as part of the recruitment process.

## Romario takes charge at Vasco

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Veteran Brazilian striker Romario, who failed a dope test after taking a substance to combat hair loss, was on Thursday named as the new coach of Rio club Vasco de Gama, local radio reported.

The 41-year-old, who was a World Cup winner in 1994, tested positive for finasteride following a match between Vasco and Palmeiras on October 28.

But he has put that setback behind him to take charge of the club following the resignation of Valdir Espinosa.

Livorno, who had a dreadful start to the season but are unbeaten in their last five matches, having won three of them.

However, Roma are themselves brimming with confidence having not lost in 11 matches in all competitions, winning eight of those.

And veteran right-back Cristian Panucci is allowing himself to dream a little.

"Life is a dream for me right now because I didn't think I would win so much," he told Sky Sport.

"I have one more dream and that's to win the Scudetto with Roma. Last year we didn't put up much of a fight."

## FIXTURES

**Saturday**  
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## Law wary of Arsenal

AFP, London



Manchester United legend Denis Law believes Arsenal represent the biggest obstacle to his old club's hopes of retaining the Premier League title.

Liverpool have been in scintillating form of late, scoring 21 times in their last five matches, and Chelsea have also made it clear they will not give up the battle without an almighty scrap.

But Law expects the champions and the current league leaders to gradually pull away as the title race enters the run-in.

"I would say it will be between Arsenal and United, but so many things come into the equation between now and the end of the season," said the former United and Scotland striker.

"If everything remains equal you would say they are the top two."

"The nice thing is they are both exciting teams who play football in the right way. Arsene (Wenger) has done extremely well. Through the years he has lost some real key players and has still been able to slot people in."

"They had a bit of a dip over the last couple of years but you have to hand it to him, they are back up there. He has created some lovely teams, and he knows he is in a battle with Manchester United."

With the hectic and often decisive end-of-year programme of matches looming on the horizon, the chances of this weekend's fixtures having any significant impact on the balance of power at the top of the table appear slim.

All of the top four will come up against opponents currently struggling at the other end of the table and it seems a fair bet that the results will reflect the widening gulf between the Premier League's aristocrats and artisans.

Having conceded over two goals a game and won just once in 15

attempts, bottom side Derby will approach their visit to Manchester United with understandable trepidation.

New manager Paul Jewell's personal record against United is equally discouraging, the former Bradford and Wigan boss having lost all seven of his duels with Sir Alex Ferguson.

Chelsea are hoping to have goalkeeper Petr Cech back in action when Sunderland visit Stamford Bridge on Saturday, the Czech international having been sidelined for a month with a calf injury.

With a trip to Arsenal coming up on December 16, that will be an extremely welcome development for manager Avram Grant, although the Israeli has warned his players that they cannot afford to let their concentration slip as they seek to close a six-point gap on the league leaders.

"If we lose against Sunderland then Arsenal will not be such a big game," he admitted.

With both Steven Gerrard and

Fernando Torres in free-scoring form, Reading will not relish the visit of Liverpool but Steve Coppell's side could be handed a favour if Reds boss Rafael Benitez opts to rest some of his bigger names ahead of the make-or-break Champions League clash with Marseille in France on Tuesday.

After being held to a 1-1 draw at Newcastle in midweek, Arsenal will be determined to ensure no more points go astray in the north-east when they travel to Middlesbrough on Sunday.

## FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)  
**Saturday**  
Aston Villa v Portsmouth (1245 GMT), Chelsea v Sunderland, Everton v Fulham, Man Utd v Derby, Newcastle v Birmingham, Reading v Liverpool (1715 GMT)  
**Sunday**  
Blackburn v West Ham (1600 GMT), Bolton v Wigan, Middlesbrough v Arsenal (1330 GMT), Tottenham v Manchester City

## All to do for Barca

AFP, Madrid



Christmas cracker at Camp Nou on December 23.

Last season Barcelona led from the front only for Real to steal the title in the closing weeks of the campaign but this time around they have been the ones doing the chasing.

Barcelona's 1-1 derby draw at Espanyol last weekend saw them lose more ground and just one win away from home underlines an increasing problem.

"Last Saturday's draw did not feel like a defeat but it was a fair result and we are not performing as well as we should away from home," explained coach Frank Rijkaard.

Rijkaard made a bold statement by dropping Brazilian Ronaldinho to the bench showing that no-one is

bigger than the team.

"Everything I do is for the good of the team. When Ronaldinho gets back to his best it will be great for us," added the Dutchman.

Barcelona are at home on Sunday and host a Deportivo La Coruna team that are a shadow of the side that used to be regulars on the Champions League circuit.

Deportivo are in the bottom three and Barcelona are expected to net the three points.

Real have proved more resilient than Barca on their travels and can put pressure on their foes by winning at Athletic Bilbao on Saturday.

The re-emergence of captain Raul has been the major boost for Real this season with the striker scoring eight goals to top the goalscoring charts along with Lionel Messi and Luis Fabiano.

Raul now has 195 league goals for Real and is just 21 behind the club's legendary all-time leading scorer Alfredo Di Stefano.

Raul collected the last of his 102 caps for the Spanish national team back in September 2006 and coach Luis Aragonés has not ruled out taking him to Euro 2008 in the summer.

"He could go to the European championships," said Aragonés. "He is getting a lot of credit and he deserves it all."

Another bonus for Real manager Bernd Schuster is the rebirth of Brazilian midfielder Julio Baptista who shone in the starting line-up against Racing last weekend.

Baptista was farmed out on loan at Arsenal last season but Schuster has now given the ex-Sevilla man a last chance to prove his worth.

Villarreal slipped up with a 2-0 defeat against Valladolid but still lie third, level on points with Barcelona, and face a Real Betis in crisis.

Betis sacked Hector Cuper after the 2-0 reverse against Atletico and Paco Chapparo has the task of guiding the club, now second from bottom, to safety.

Elsewhere Atletico Madrid aim to consolidate fourth position in Sunday's derby match against Getafe.

Atletico are just a point behind Barcelona but Getafe are no push-over having already toppled Barcelona 2-0 this season.

Valencia have fallen to sixth

following a shock 3-0 home defeat to Athletic Bilbao and their new coach Ronald Koeman is far from happy.

"It is a mental problem as when we go behind we do things we would not normally do," fumed Koeman.

Valencia are at Osasuna on Saturday looking to rebuild flagging confidence.

UEFA Cup holders Sevilla know all about that with last season's third place a distant memory as they lie 12th after tasting eight defeats.

Sevilla, who have reached the knockout phase of the Champions League, entertain Murcia on Sunday.

## FIXTURES

**Saturday**  
Osasuna v Valencia, Athletic Bilbao v Real Madrid  
**Sunday**  
Almeria v Valladolid, Villarreal v Real Betis, Levante v Recreativo, Huelva, Real Zaragoza v Espanyol, Racing v Mallorca, Sevilla v Murcia, Atletico Madrid v Getafe, Barcelona v Deportivo La Coruna

## Milan target victory

AFP, Yokohama



of the season.

"We have prepared for months to compete in the Club World Cup. We feel as tense as in the Champions League final and we think this is equally important," vice president Adriano Galliani said.

With the Serie-A looking more and more like a two-horse race between Inter Milan and AS Roma, he added that winning the Club World Cup was crucial.

"We have a whole week to get rid of the jet-lag and we will make every effort to win this demanding event," he said.

"We regard this as the biggest goal of the season."

The tournament of continental champions was to kick off in Tokyo Friday evening with a preliminary play-off between Iran's Sepahan and Waitakere United of New Zealand.

Milan arrived Thursday and went straight into a light workout,

just two days after beating Celtic 1-0 in a Champions League game with striker Filippo Inzaghi scoring a record-breaking 63rd goal in European competition.

It was a surprisingly early arrival for the Champions League and Super Cup winners, who have a bye into the semifinals on Thursday next week.

The other semifinal seeds, South American champions Boca Juniors of Argentina, arrived early Friday.

In the past European clubs, busy at the height of Champions League and domestic action, have usually arrived just days before their first match.

South American clubs have traditionally been more enthusiastic about the three-year-old Club World Cup and its predecessor the Intercontinental Cup, contested between the champions of Europe and South America.

"The tough schedule has made European players ill-prepared and allowed South Americans to win more times," Galliani said.

"We have brought here about 70 per cent of the team and we want to put on Milan's best show."

Brazilian clubs have dominated the last two editions of the tournament with Sao Paulo beating Liverpool 1-0 in 2005 and Internacional whipping Barcelona by the same score last year.

Milan said they were hungry to avenge Boca, who beat them on penalties in the 2003 Intercontinental Cup final. Each club won the Intercontinental Cup three times.

"We reached the final but could not beat them last time. We could not help it as luck played a part," said Milan captain and defender Paolo Maldini. "We want to win this time and even the score."

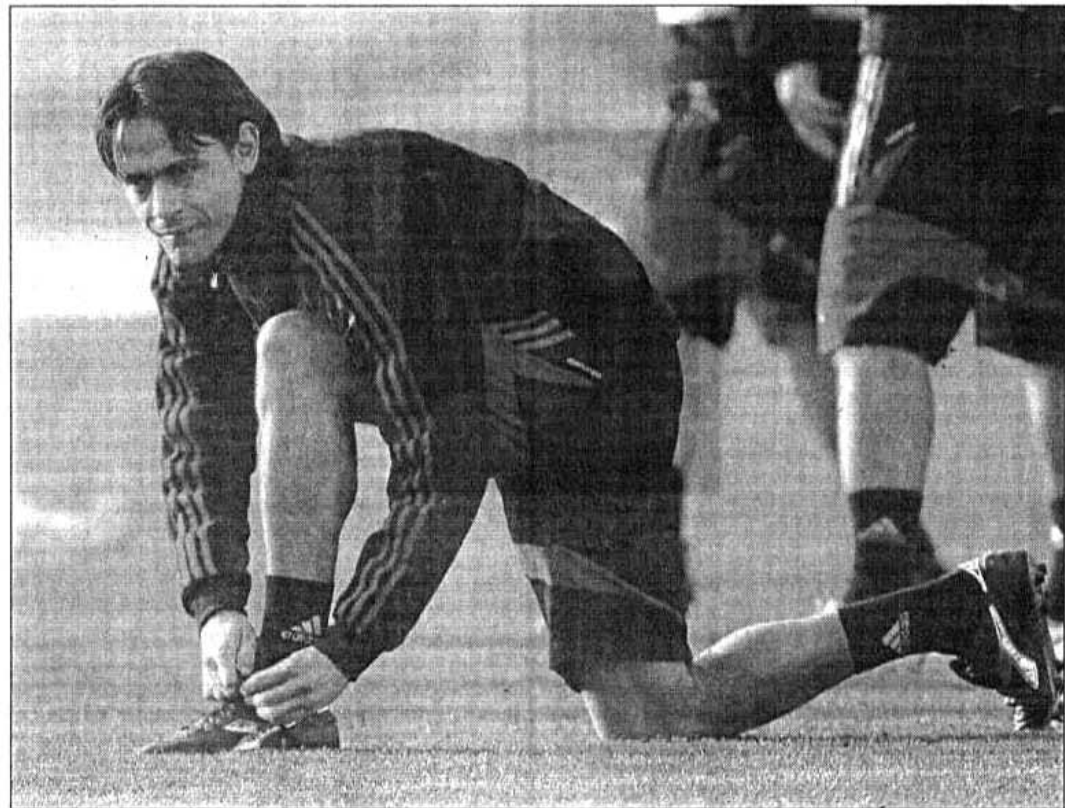
Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said he was taking nothing for granted against Boca or any other opponents.

Japan's Urawa Reds will face on Monday the winners of the Sepahan-Waitakere play-off on Milan's side of the tournament. Boca will take on the winners of Sunday's quarterfinal between Tunisia's Etoile Sahel and Pachuca of Mexico.

"I have studied each team and I will see them play in the coming few days. So I'm not worried about mapping out our strategy," said Ancelotti. "But there's Boca and other teams who are formidable."

He noted that Urawa Reds, who won their first AFC Champions League title this year but lost their J-League crown, had a fine coach in German Holger Osieck and a dangerous Brazilian defender in Marcus Tullio Tanaka.

"They are a team to be reckoned with," Ancelotti said.



Milan striker Filippo Inzaghi does routine stretches during a training session in Yokohama on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Ibra urges caution

AFP, Rome



season.

Inter entertain Torino on Sunday after a stunning opening to the season that has seen them win 10 and draw four of their 14 league matches.

They have also qualified from their Champions League group with a game to spare and all that despite a midfield injury crisis.

With players such as Patrick Vieira, Luis Figo and Dejan Stankovic already missing, Olivier Dacourt was this week ruled out for the rest of the season.

But such is the strength of Inter's squad that whoever comes in still proves too strong for their opponents, as Lazio found out on Wednesday as they were chopped down 3-0.

Only Roma have managed to

hang onto Inter's coat tails so far with the likes of Juventus and AC Milan already eight and 16 points adrift of the champions.

But Sweden forward Ibrahimovic, who has been the star of the season for Inter, is keen to play down expectation and he denied the title race is already boiling down to a shoot-out between Inter and second-placed Roma.

"The title is not yet decided, there are many games left," he said. "We have to keep winning as we have done up until now. But we have to keep our concentration and play with confidence and that way we'll keep pushing forwards."

"It's not just between ourselves and Roma. Right now we're the top two but other teams can catch us. Right now we're a little way ahead but the championship is long."

Even so, Inter have shown hardly any weaknesses and a home match against Torino looks like a certain three-pointer.

The same cannot be said of Roma's trip to lowly but resurgent

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