



Arsenal striker Nicklas Bendtner (L) slots the ball through the legs of Steaua Bucharest goalkeeper Robinson Zapata to score in their Champions League match at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday.

Wenger angry at fixture pile-up

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger has accused the Premier League of making life harder for Arsenal than their rivals.

The Gunners crashed to their first league defeat this season against Middlesbrough on Sunday, at the end of a week when they were forced to play three consecutive away league matches.

Wenger's side faced Aston Villa and then embarked on the long trip to Newcastle in midweek before finishing the week back in the north-east at Middlesbrough.

The Arsenal boss is unhappy his team had to play their game in hand against Newcastle last week, while Liverpool, who also still have an extra game to play, had the midweek off.

"I'm not saying Middlesbrough didn't play well - they deserved their victory - but I also think it was unfair to force us to play three away games in the league in one week," Wenger said in the match programme for Arsenal's Champions League tie against Steaua Bucharest.

"The Newcastle game was rearranged from earlier in the season, and we were told it was the only date it could be played but why wasn't Liverpool's rearranged game played then? They still have that game in hand."

Despite Arsenal's failure to win their last two matches, Wenger insists there is no hint of panic at the Emirates Stadium.

"I don't know what kind of world we are in at the moment where everyone says at the start of the season we will be lucky to finish in the top 10 and then it's a crisis when we lose one game," he said.

"I just feel that this team is extremely strong mentally and we are at the start of an era. This team remains very hungry and will get stronger and stronger."

Villa injured again

AFP, Madrid

Valencia will be without their injury-plagued Spanish international striker David Villa for at least three weeks with a hamstring injury, the club announced here on Wednesday.

Villa tore his left hamstring during Valencia's 0-0 Champions League draw at Chelsea on Tuesday, the fifth successive game in which Valencia have failed to score.

Last season, the 26-year-old striker was the top scoring local player in La Liga with 16 goals.

His prolific goals lead to the Spanish media frequently speculated that he was set for a big money move to an English Premiership club, with Liverpool often mentioned.

However, Villa's form has fallen this season although he has still scored four goals in La Liga.

He has also found the net twice in Valencia's disappointing European campaign which saw them finish bottom of their group and not even qualifying for the UEFA Cup.

Villa will miss at least Valencia's next two Spanish league games, including Saturday's crunch home match against Spanish giants and traditional rivals Barcelona.

Valencia are currently seventh in La Liga with 25 points but have slipped out of the places that will see them playing in Europe again next season after only getting one point from their last three games.

He also missed four La Liga matches and one Champions League match in October and November, as well as having to drop out of the Spain squad ahead of a crucial Euro 2008 qualifier against Denmark, after suffering an ankle injury.

Fabio makes stars sweat

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham looks a good bet to win the 100th cap he craves but Fabio Capello's appointment - as England manager may not be good news for some of the other big names in the national squad.

Capello, who was expected to be confirmed as Steve McClaren's successor on Thursday following "extremely positive" talks with the English Football Association, has earned the opportunity to become the best-paid coach in world football over the course of 16 years in charge of four of the world's biggest clubs.

In that time, the Italian has earned a reputation for displaying steel-plated stubbornness when it comes to putting the needs of his team ahead of superstar egos.

Beckham and Ronaldo at Real Madrid, Alessandro del Piero at Juventus, Edgar Davids at Milan and Francesco Totti at AS Roma: you could put together a formidable team of players that have found themselves sitting on the bench after lighting Capello's notoriously short fuse.

Amongst England's current crop of allegedly world class performers, Frank Lampard would appear to be the most vulnerable to the Capello chop.

Ever since Marcel Desailly anchored AC Milan to their famous 4-0 demolition of Barcelona in the 1994 Champions League final, all of the 61-year-old's club teams have been constructed around a

midfield player deployed essentially as a shield for the back four.

High-tempo pressing has also been a recurring theme in Capello's tactics, so it would appear highly unlikely that he will persist with the dysfunctional Lampard-Steven Gerrard partnership that England have been struggling with for the last five years.

There are also rumours that Capello is no great fan of the current England captain, John Terry, while a player like Shaun Wright-Phillips, championed by his pace under the old regime, may find himself a victim of the new manager's insistence that the ability to retain possession is the primary qualification for international football.

That should play in favour of Beckham. The former England captain was axed by Capello after he agreed to leave Real Madrid for LA Galaxy last season, but he won the Italian's admiration for refusing to sulk, fighting his way back into the side and playing a key role in helping to secure the Spanish league title.

Barring injury, Beckham, who won his 99th cap as a substitute in the 3-2 defeat by Croatia that ensured England missed out on Euro 2008, is certain to be in Capello's first squad, which will be assembled for a friendly against Switzerland at Wembley in February.

But Claudio Ranieri believes his compatriot will not shy away from axing some big names if he believes it necessary to construct a team capable of challenging for glory in South Africa.

"Capello picks players who play

together well - it sounds easy and obvious but not everyone can do it," the Italian former Chelsea boss said.

"He goes for the best blend, not necessarily the best individuals. The team is more important than any individual. And his teams work together so well and are very difficult to score against. And sooner or later, they will score against you."

Having won league titles with all of his clubs, Capello has the kind of pedigree that McClaren conspicuously lacked and Ranieri expects England's fans, who jeered as often as they cheered during the unsuccessful Euro 2008 qualifying campaign, to rally behind him.

"The fans will love Capello when he wins. And Fabio Capello is a winner," he said. "I think he can win the World Cup with England and make them into a team feared and respected throughout the world."

To achieve that goal, Capello believes he has to get England's best players to overcome what he sees as a "mental block" preventing them from reproducing their club form on the international stage.

"How can players of the level of Beckham or (Michael) Owen have performances so different when they play for their national team?" Capello said recently.

"It's clear the shirt is very heavy even for those great champions. The manager has a fundamental role to play in this situation. He has to be more of a psychologist than a tactician or a technician. It's clear there is a mental block - otherwise how can you explain their elimination from Euro 2008?"

Capello said recently.

Meanwhile, PSV, who needed to beat Inter to have any hope of qualifying, were reduced to 10 men in the 28th minute when Edison Mendez was red-carded for a foul on David Suazo.

The one-man deficit eventually proved decisive with the Italian champions opening the scoring in the 64th minute.

A long ball down the left released Suazo who skipped past Carlos Salcido and Timmy Simons before cutting the ball back for Argentinian striker Julio Cruz to apply the simplest of finishes for his 18th Champions League career goal.

However, he had the last word with his team's third in the last

minute.

Meanwhile, PSV, who needed to beat Inter to have any hope of qualifying, were reduced to 10 men in the 28th minute when Edison Mendez was red-carded for a foul on David Suazo.

The one-man deficit eventually proved decisive with the Italian champions opening the scoring in the 64th minute.

A long ball down the left released Suazo who skipped past Carlos Salcido and Timmy Simons before cutting the ball back for Argentinian striker Julio Cruz to apply the simplest of finishes for his 18th Champions League career goal.

However, he had the last word with his team's third in the last

minute.

Meanwhile, PSV, who needed to beat Inter to have any hope of qualifying, were reduced to 10 men in the 28th minute when Edison Mendez was red-carded for a foul on David Suazo.

The one-man deficit eventually proved decisive with the Italian champions opening the scoring in the 64th minute.

A long ball down the left released Suazo who skipped past Carlos Salcido and Timmy Simons before cutting the ball back for Argentinian striker Julio Cruz to apply the simplest of finishes for his 18th Champions League career goal.

UCL last 16 qualifiers

AFP, Paris

Qualifiers for the last 16 of the Champions League after the conclusion of the group stages on Wednesday:

FC Porto
Liverpool
Chelsea
Schalke 04
Real Madrid
Olympiakos
AC Milan
Celtic
Barcelona
Lyon
Man Utd
Roma
Inter Milan
Fenerbahce
Sevilla
Arsenal

Hitzfeld explains Kahn fine

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich had to punish captain Oliver Kahn to reimpose discipline after he left the Christmas party early and criticised team mates, coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said on Wednesday.

The former Germany goalkeeper criticised team mates Luca Toni and Franck Ribery this week, saying that while playing a few good games for their former clubs might have been enough, they would have to do more now they were Bayern players.

On Tuesday, Bayern announced Kahn had been fined 25,000 euros (\$36,720) and suspended for Saturday's game at Hertha Berlin, their final league fixture before the mid-season Bundesliga break.

"I had to set an example so everyone at Bayern knows how they're expected to behave," Hitzfeld told a news conference. "Players criticising their team mates must stop. Otherwise we become a madhouse."

"Kahn must know he has to set an example to the younger players and at the Christmas party he did not behave well. The captain can't leave early."

Lehmann puts family first

AFP, Berlin

Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann could sacrifice his place in Germany's team for the 2008 European Championships because he wants his young family to remain in London until next summer.

Lehmann lost his place in the Arsenal first team in September and is being courted by Bundesliga side VfL Wolfsburg, who are offering the guarantee of regular football.

But the 38-year-old does not want to relocate his young family from England's capital just yet; even though Germany coach Joachim Loew has said Lehmann must play regular first-team football if he wants to keep his place.

"My wife and I want to stay in London until at least the summer of 2008, even if I don't play for Arsenal," Lehmann told weekly German newspaper Die Zeit.

Lehmann does plan to move his family and three children back to Germany next summer, but does not want to move sooner and risk unsettling them.

As well as Wolfsburg, English Premier League side Manchester City have also expressed an interest in signing Lehmann, according to reports in the British media.

Seles considering comeback

Tennis

INTERNET, undated

Monica Seles has revealed she is considering a comeback to the WTA Tour after watching Lindsay Davenport make a successful return since giving birth to a son in June.

Seles has not played since the French Open in 2003 when she was struggling with back and foot injuries. But the 34-year-old, who still plays regularly with former world number ones Jennifer Capriati and Martina Navratilova, has never formally retired and is now eyeing a possible return to action in Miami next March.

"I still love to play. That has never lessened," Seles told the LA Times. "What Lindsay did was just

so cool.

"And what I know now, I wish I had known then. Like stretching more before and after matches. You go out and win 6-3 6-1 and say that was easy and you wouldn't stretch."

Seles, who was ranked as world number one in 1991 and 1992, won her first major at Roland Garros in 1990 before going on to win seven of the next 11 Slams, despite not competing at Wimbledon in 1991.

But shortly after winning her third Australian Open title in 1993, Seles was stabbed in the back by Guenter Parache, a spectator who came down from the stands during her quarter final clash with Magdalena Maleeva in Hamburg.

Seles did not play again until August 1995 and won only one more Grand Slam, in Australia in 1996.

"I guess I kind of had two tennis careers," Seles continued. "And now perhaps a third. I certainly would not ever be able to do a full schedule again, because of the foot."

"But I'm thinking about the Slams and about some of the better tournaments that lead into them. I won't decide for sure until the beginning of the year and the Australian is certainly not possible. But Miami. Maybe."

MONICA SELES

'This is for Riquelme'

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Neri Cardozo has dedicated his winning goal in Boca Juniors' 1-0 Club World Cup semifinal win over Tunisia's Ettouil Sahel to missing superstar Juan Riquelme.

Cardozo put his hands behind his ears, imitating puppet mouse Topo Gigio, when he celebrated the first goal of his international club career in the 37th minute at the National Stadium here Wednesday.

"I celebrated that way for Roman, who was in Tokyo but unable to take part. He came up to me before the game to wish me luck and told me to play as I knew how," 21-year-old Cardozo told FIFA.com afterwards.

"After the game, he returned to congratulate me for the goal and

thank me for dedicating it to him," he added.

"He's very important to us, not just as a player but also as a teammate and a friend. His presence gave us all a big lift."

Riquelme, who recently moved from Spain's Villarreal to his club, was ruled out of the annual tournament of continental champions because he missed the deadline to join Boca's preliminary list of players.

But the 29-year-old playmaker has come to Japan and trained with the team ahead of the semifinal.

He earlier told reporters here: "It's a very important tournament. I will stick together with teammates and support them even though I am not allowed to play."

Riquelme played for Boca between 1996 and 2002, helping them win six league and international titles. He also played on loan from

Villarreal during the Argentine side's victory in South America's Libertadores Cup, scoring eight goals and becoming the most valuable player of the championship.

Cardozo, who has taken part in two FIFA Under-20 World Cups, said: "When you score the goal that wins a game for your side and sends them through to a final, you cannot ask for much more."

"I haven't played much recently because of an injury, so this goal will give me tons of confidence for what lies ahead."

Boca will play the winners of the other semifinal between Italy's AC Milan and Urawa Reds of Japan in Yokohama later Thursday.

Boca and Milan each won the South America-Europe Intercontinental Cup three times before it was merged into the Club World Cup in 2005.

The new bionic ball

Football

REUTERS, Tokyo

A new "bionic ball" being tested at the Club World Cup in Japan could soon be a regular feature at FIFA tournaments, its developers said on Thursday.

The technology, involving magnetic sensors that determine if the micro-chipped ball has crossed the goal line, has worked well so far, according to co-designers adidas and Cairns.

The developers added that feedback from the players at the seven-team competition had been positive.

"We are very satisfied," adidas' chief of FIFA Affairs Gunter Pfau told a news conference in Tokyo to demonstrate the ball's qualities. "No ball was damaged. All the systems have worked."

An implanted microchip sends an instant signal to the referee's wristwatch to indicate if the whole of the ball has crossed the line.

FIFA hope the breakthrough will eliminate controversy and want to use the technology at the 2010 World Cup if the prototype proves 100 per cent reliable.

Earlier difficulties with chips becoming loose have been addressed, adidas said, adding that the ball was stress-tested to seven times the force of gravity.

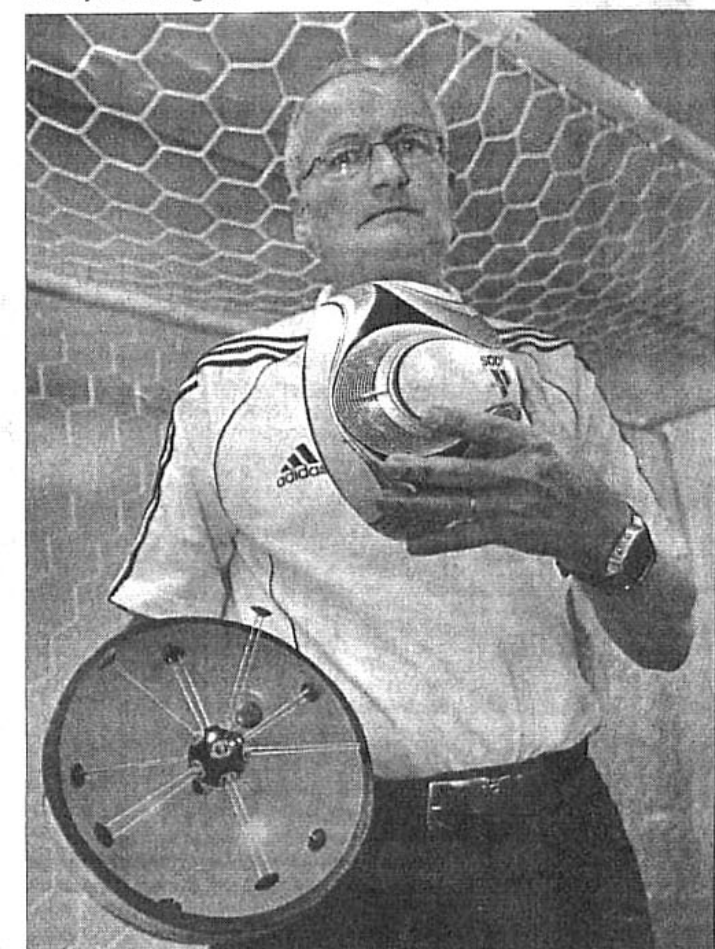
Arguments over whether the ball has crossed the goal line have raged for years, Geoff Hurst's disputed goal for England in the 1966 World Cup final against Germany arguably the most famous example.

Hurst smashed a shot against the crossbar and the ball bounced

downwards. It was unclear if it had crossed the line but the referee awarded a goal after consulting his linesman.

England won the game 4-2 but many German fans still debate the validity of Hurst's goal.

"We're not trying to change history," Pfau said, using a photograph of Hurst's goal in his demonstration. "This technology is for more transparency and to support the referee in making more accurate decisions."



Adidas officer Gunter Pfau displays a cut model of the new 'bionic football' during a press conference in Yokohama on Thursday.

A Turkish surprise

AFP, Paris

Turkish side Fenerbahce qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League for the first time on Wednesday thanks to a 3-1 win over CSKA Moscow in Istanbul.

Fenerbahce took the runners-up spot in Group G behind Inter Milan who had already made sure of their place in the knockout round.

Inter beat PSV Eindhoven 1-0 to end the Dutch side's slim hopes of pipping the Turks for second spot.

Fenerbahce went a goal down

after half an hour when their Brazilian defender Edu diverted a cross from Caner Erkin, a Turk who plays in Russia, past his own goalkeeper Volkan Demirel.

But they were indebted to another Brazilian for pulling them level two minutes later when midfielder Alex volleyed past Igor Akinfeev.

On the stroke of half-time, Champions League debutant Ugur Boralt spotted home a fine pass from Alex to put Fenerbahce ahead and on course for the next round.

Boralt came close to making it 3-1 after 65 minutes but his shot came back off the crossbar.

However, he had the last word with his team's third in the last

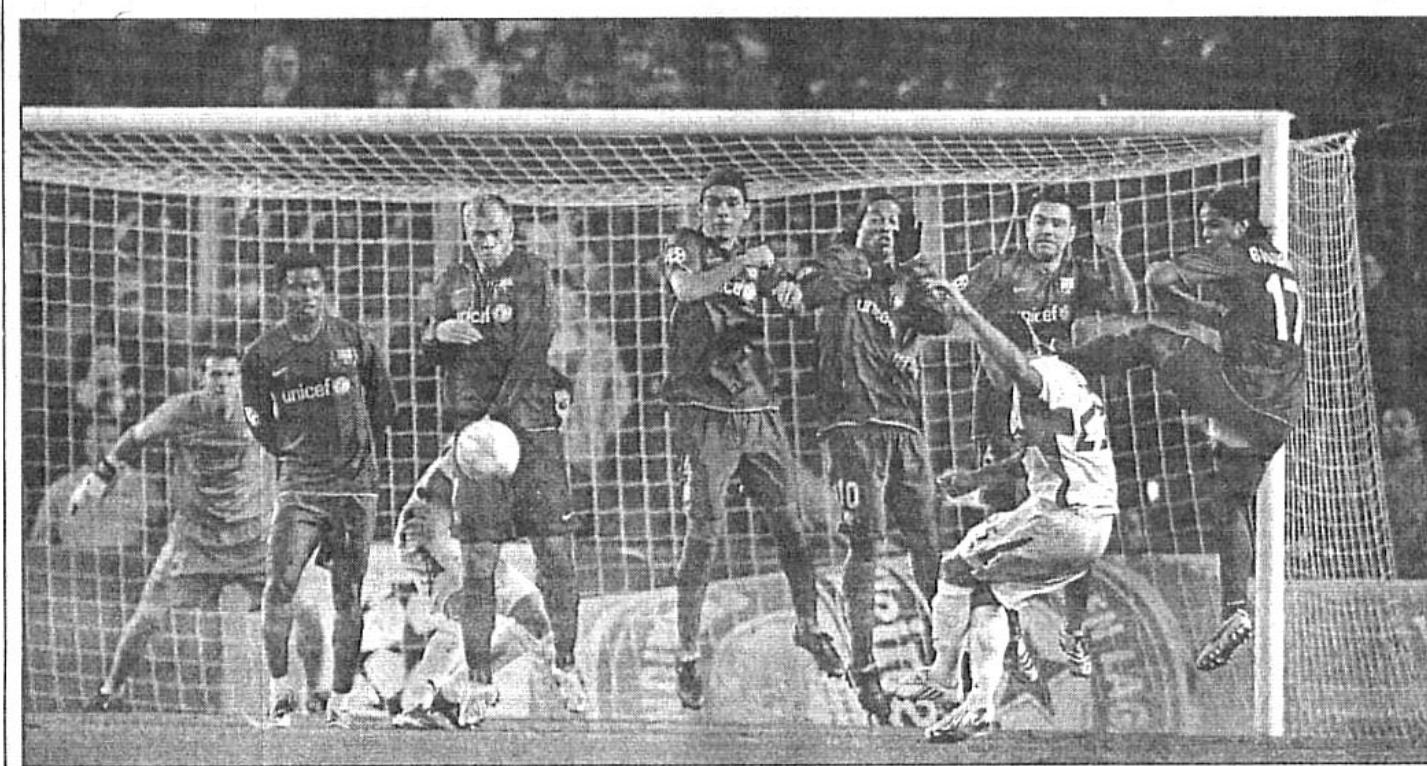
minute.

Meanwhile, PSV, who needed to beat Inter to have any hope of qualifying, were reduced to 10 men in the 28th minute when Edison Mendez was red-carded for a foul on David Suazo.

The one-man deficit eventually proved decisive with the Italian champions opening the scoring in the 64th minute.

A long ball down the left released Suazo who skipped past Carlos Salcido and Timmy Simons before cutting the ball back for Argentinian striker Julio Cruz to apply the simplest of finishes for his 18th Champions League career goal.

However, he had the last word with his team's third in the last



Stuttgart midfielder Antonio da Silva (2nd R) is about to score a stunning free kick against Barcelona during their Champions League encounter at the Nou Camp on Wednesday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

| ACROSS | DOWN |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 Flight for parts | 1 Witted network |
| 6 Let me think ... | 2 Pair at Count's ballwick |
| 9 Comedian | 4 Tower city |
| 12 Anticipate | 5 Plant parts |
| 13 Verily | 6 Zoo a whack at |
| 14 Every iota | 7 Vagan's no-no |
| 15 Not as good | 8 Ruin the veneer |
| 16 Terrestrial | 9 Cow-poke's cozy |
| 18 Mourn | 10 Apporition |
| 20 Basket-ball target | 11 Sign without words |
| 21 Succor | 17 Crowd |
| 23 Monterey Mrs. | |
| 24 Slick | |
| 25 Botch | |
| 27 Jettison's dog | |
| 29 Bill | |
| 30 Haley's backup | |
| 31 Truthful | |
| 35 Game venue | |
| 37 Yawn | |
| 38 Uninsured | |
| 41 Lamb's maul | |
| 43 Scamed | |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|---|----|----|----|----|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
| 12 | | | | | | 13 | | | 14 | |
| 15 | | | | | | 16 | | | 17 | |
| | | 18 | | | | 19 | | | 20 | |
| 21 | 22 | | | 23 | | | | 24 | | |
| 25 | | | 26 | | | 27 | | 28 | | |
| 29 | | | | 30 | | | 31 | | 32 | 33 |
| | | | 35 | | | 36 | | | 37 | |
| 38 | 39 | 40 | | | | 41 | | 42 | | 43 |
| | | | | | | | | | | |
| 44 | | | | | | 45 | | | 46 | |
| 47 | | | | | | 48 | | | 49 | |
| 52 | | | | | | 53 | | | 54 | |
| 55 | | | | | | 56 | | | 57 | |

CRYPTOQUIP

Q P H L H F Z H K Q P Q F Q B Y
C F G M V Y K A Y G P A E H N N -
O R B B Q F A L H O Z Q F Y N M G R V K
B Z H B L H C Y Z L Q H V V L G M Q F A
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: SUPPOSING YOU'RE VERY SKILLED AT DESIGNING KITCHENS, DO YOU HAVE COUNTER INTELLIGENCE?
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: V equals I