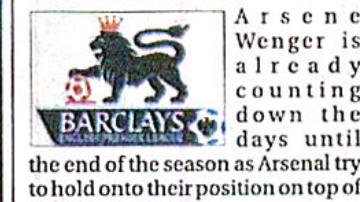




India captain Anil Kumble (L) jogs around Melbourne Cricket Ground on Tuesday with his charges during training ahead of today's first Test match against Australia.

Arsenal look to stay clear

AFP, London



and the return of Cesc Fabregas and Alexander Hleb has given a renewed verve to their midfield.

Even so Wenger would love a present from an old enemy over Christmas.

Sunderland manager Roy Keane was a constant thorn in Wenger's side during his time at Manchester United. But now he can help the Gunners by inflicting defeat on United.

Wenger's side lead Manchester United by one point going and the Gunners boss knows that the last four teams to be in pole position on Christmas Day went on to win the title.

He would happily end the season now if he could but the Frenchman, whose side travel to Portsmouth on Wednesday, believes Arsenal have the staying power to hold off United regardless.

"It's important to be top and I hope the statistic proves right," Wenger said. "If it does then let's just go straight to the end of the season now!"

"But really I feel it's too early to say. In the last two seasons at this stage there was only one team involved - Chelsea or Manchester United. This year there are more teams in it so it's impossible to say how things will happen. Being top now is no insurance."

"However, this is one of the few years we have beaten Tottenham home and away. It's a good sign and it should increase the belief of the team. It shows we can get three points without being at our best."

Arsenal's gritty home wins against Chelsea and Tottenham proved they have the character to fight for their first title since 2004, and the return of Cesc Fabregas and Alexander Hleb has given a renewed verve to their midfield.

demands are far higher than when I first started."

Chelsea remain in the title hunt after Sunday's win at Blackburn and will hope to close the gap on the top two by gaining revenge over Aston Villa, who beat them earlier this season.

Blues manager Avram Grant is surprised that the big four are all still in with a chance of winning the league at the midway point of the campaign.

"I think it's unusual to have four teams fighting for the title in December," Grant said. "All four teams won their first game of the Christmas programme, so for you and us it will be an exciting title race this season."

"For us, six points is a gap we can make up."

Liverpool's convincing win over Portsmouth last weekend settled a few nerves at Anfield after successive league defeats. But Rafa Benitez's side have no room for error as they try to catch up with Arsenal.

Reds striker Dirk Kuyt believes they have to win all three Christmas matches, starting at Derby.

"We have to win our next three now at Derby, Manchester City and at home to Wigan and if we can get nine points from those games I think we will get closer to the other teams," Kuyt said.

"We want to go on a run and win a lot of games. Every defeat in the league is a big one for us because you just want to win and compete with Arsenal, Manchester United and Chelsea so we can't afford to lose many more."

Cech injury not serious

AFP, London

Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech escaped serious injury and suffered just bruising to his hip when he limped out of the 1-0 win over Blackburn on Sunday.

The London club said on Monday that the Czech international underwent a scan following the collision with Blackburn forward Roque Santa Cruz.

It was feared his injury could prove costly for the Stamford Bridge outfit, who are already without rib injury victim Carlo Cudicini for the home clash with Aston Villa on Wednesday.

"Scans have shown bruising around Petr's hip and side," said a Chelsea statement.

"We will continue to monitor the situation over the coming days and hope to have him back playing as soon as possible."

Third-choice keeper Hilario is likely to start against Villa on Wednesday.

Wenger rules out new recruits

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger is planning to ignore the January sales because he believes Arsenal have enough strength in depth to last the pace in the Premier League title race.

Wenger will be without Kolo Toure and Emmanuel Eboue for a month in the New Year while the defenders play in the African Nations Cup.

The transfer window opens in January but the Gunners boss feels he has enough cover and doesn't want to sign a player who would be consigned to the reserves when Toure and Eboue return in February.

"Kolo Toure goes off to the African Nations Cup shortly and we may lose Alex Song for it as well," Wenger said.

"Even with Johan Djourou returning from Birmingham we would then be left with three specialist centre-backs."

"If I signed another one we'd have too many after the African Nations. Sometimes you just have to suffer during the tournament and let your players play."

Osim goes into rehab

AFP, Tokyo

Former Japan coach Ivica Osim has moved out of a hospital intensive care unit to start rehabilitation about five weeks after a major stroke that cost him his job, a football official said Tuesday.

"Transfers are common in football," Japan Football Association executive director Kozo Tajima quoted the 66-year-old Bosnian as quipping of his move.

Osim came out of a coma three weeks ago and had stayed on at a

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A year of extremes

Football

AFP, Rome

Just as it was over the previous 12 months, it has been a year of extremes in Italy.

In 2006, there was the infamous match-fixing scandal that threatened to bring Italian football to its knees.

That was quickly followed by the pinnacle of footballing achievement as the Azzurri claimed their fourth World Cup victory with a penalty shoot-out triumph over France.

In 2007, it seems as if little has changed.

AC Milan conquered all abroad while their bitter cross-city rivals Inter were dominating at home, yet still the year could not pass without tragedies and scandals.

In February, a policeman was killed after violence broke out around the Sicilian derby between Catania and Palermo.

In November, a Rome-based disc jockey was accidentally shot dead by a policeman when violence reared its ugly head once again, this time at a gas station when rival Juventus and Lazio fans crossed paths when both heading to away fixtures.

On the pitch, both Milans were majestic, while the national team teetered on the brink of missing out

on Euro 2008.

A 0-0 home draw with France in September ensured palms all over the country remained tepid right up until November when veteran right-back Cristian Panucci popped up to score a late header in Glasgow to give Italy a 2-1 victory over a valiant Scotland and a ticket to Austria and Switzerland.

Ironically, the world champions were then placed alongside France, the Netherlands and Romania in their group for the Euro 2008 finals.

It would be a similar story in club football.

Inter Milan have been untouchable at home, romping away to the Italian title in the 2006-07 season while setting a new Italian league record of 17 straight victories and finishing the season 22-points clear of second-placed Roma.

This season they are unbeaten after 17 games and already with a seven-point lead on the pack.

And following closely behind are a resurgent Juventus who were promoted having claimed the Serie B crown last season and already almost back to their best, leading eight points behind Inter as Serie A went into its winter break.

But in Europe, where Inter have long failed to match their close neighbours, AC Milan have been quite simply unstoppable.

With Brazilian playmaker Kaka to inspire them and veteran forward Filippo Inzaghi banging in

vital goals, Milan stormed to the Champions League title in May with victory over Liverpool and then added the Club World Cup in December by dominating Boca Juniors.

Inzaghi scored two goals in each game - a 2-1 win over the English outfit and 4-2 triumph against the Argentines - but it is Kaka who has been the real star of the show.

In fact it was his two-goals in the Champions League semifinal first leg at Old Trafford that essentially set the stage for Milan's success.

That allowed Milan to come away from Manchester United's ground with a narrow 3-2 defeat and a brilliant 3-0 victory in the return leg eliminated the toughest hurdle in the glory quest.

Kaka was rightly named World Player of the Year and Ballon d'Or winner.

Inzaghi, meanwhile, surpassed the great Gerd Muller's European goalscoring record.

But just as Italy wanted to bask in its glory, along came the draw for the Champions League knockout round.

Milan drew Arsenal after winning their group, Inter, likewise having topped their group, will face Liverpool and Roma, who already had to contend with Manchester United in the group stages, face Real Madrid.

Adriano can't stop partying

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian striker Adriano, who last week promised to turn over a new leaf and get his career back on the rails, has landed in fresh controversy after being photographed at a pop concert holding a can of beer.

Brazilian newspapers Estado de Sao Paulo, O Dia and Lance all published the photographs of the player, which they said were taken on Saturday night in Rio de Janeiro.

AC Milan's injury-prone striker Ronaldo also appeared in the pictures.

Adriano last week joined Brazilian champions Sao Paulo on loan from Italy's Inter Milan, where he has barely featured in the last two seasons after battling fitness and reported alcohol problems.

On Friday, Adriano, once one of Serie A's most feared strikers, told a news conference that was determined to get his career back on track and win back his place in the Brazil team.

"I want to make the most of this chance to recover," he said. "Everyone here wants to help me. Now it just depends on me."

Adriano has been undergoing a fitness and psychological recovery programme at Sao Paulo's training centre for the last month.

Sao Paulo's players are now on holiday and are due to report back on Jan. 7 for the new season.

Sao Paulo director Marco Aurelio Cunha played down the incident.

"We have a pact of confidence with Adriano," he told the Estado de Sao Paulo. "Twenty days of work are not going to be undone by two or three parties."

Ronaldo, who has played one game this season, flew back to Brazil last week to aid his recovery from a calf injury.

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said the club would send a trainer to Brazil on Wednesday to help him.

Maradona wants to meet Ahmadinejad

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Former Argentine soccer great Diego Maradona says he wants to meet Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a leading U.S. foe, according to local media reported on Monday.

Maradona, an outspoken critic of the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush, gave a signed soccer shirt to an Iranian diplomat on Saturday after a game in the televised Showbol tournament of mini-matches.

Maradona, 47, is an admirer of Cuban leader Fidel Castro and he said this month he wanted a tattoo of Hugo Chavez, the fiery left-wing president of Venezuela and an ally of Iran.

"I already met Fidel and Chavez ... now I need to meet your president. I'd like to meet Ahmadinejad," he told Iran's top

Sven wants video referee

Football

INTERNET, undated

Sven-Goran Eriksson has renewed his call for video technology to be introduced for contentious goal-line decisions and penalties calls.

Sunderland manager Roy Keane was livid Stephen Hunt's injury-time winner for Reading was allowed to stand at the Madejski Stadium on Saturday when it appeared the ball had not crossed the line before keeper Craig Gordon palmed it out.

Manchester City were involved in a similar controversy at Villa Park, when Elano hacked Gabriel Agbonlahor's shot off the line.

Referee Lee Mason appeared to get his verdict right when he waved play on rather than awarding the

goal, a view Eriksson shared.

However, the City manager feels it is time the officials were given some assistance as they attempt to cope with the ever-increasing speed of the game.

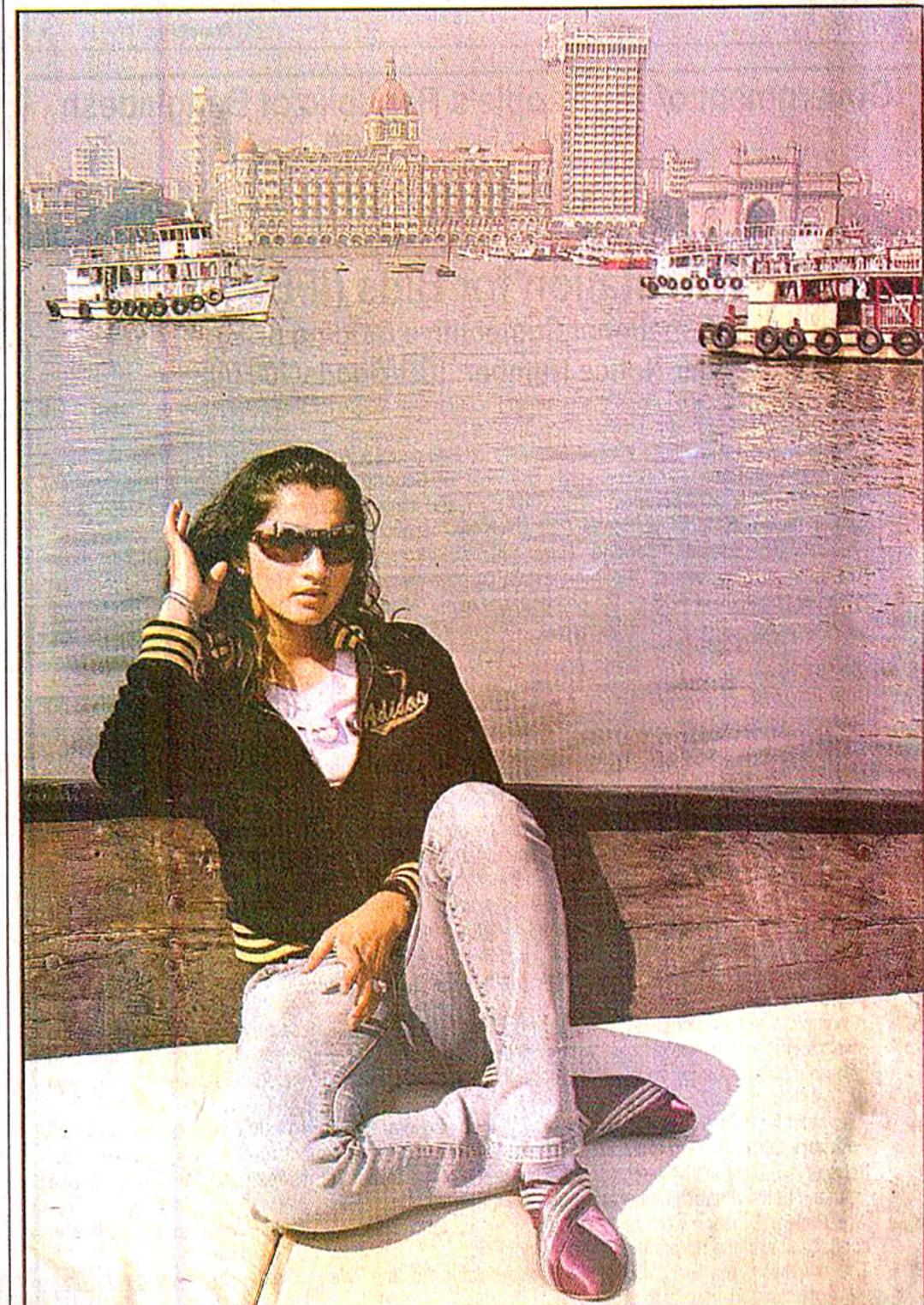
"We are going to have a debate about technology every time something happens," he said.

"No-one can really say for certain whether the one Elano stopped on Saturday was in or not.

"The referee does not have a chance, you cannot tell from the bench and while the linesman might be able to if he was in line, he never would be if he was outside the box."

"It is a very difficult situation but as long as you don't have technology there will be errors because the pitch is too big and the football is too fast."

Although the use of goal-line technology has the broad support of



Indian tennis star Sania Mirza poses during a photoshoot on a yacht on the Arabian Sea off the western coast of Mumbai on Monday.