



Chelsea striker Andriy Shevchenko is about to score from the penalty spot during their Premiership match against Aston Villa at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

## A Christmas cracker

AGENCIES, London



Aston Villa held hosts Chelsea to a 4-4 draw with a last-minute equaliser in a festive football feast bursting with controversy at Stamford Bridge.

Wednesday's Boxing Day holiday clash had it all, swinging this way and that with Villa going 2-0 up, three sendings off, two penalties, bust-ups, Chelsea scoring what would have been a last-ditch winner before an injury-time Villa equaliser.

The draw puts a dint in Chelsea's hopes of catching Arsenal and Manchester United at the top of the English Premier League.

Chelsea had gone 71 home league games unbeaten and had to battle furiously to keep the run going against the spirited Villains.

Scotland striker Shaun Maloney stabbed in a 14th-minute goal and

scored Villa's second 30 minutes later thanks to a spectacular blunder from Blues goalkeeper Petr Cech, deemed fit enough to start.

But the match swung in Chelsea's favour when Villa defender Zai Knight was sent off for fouling substitute Michael Ballack in the penalty box in first-half stoppage time.

Ukraine striker Andriy Shevchenko scored the resulting penalty and blasted in a 50th-minute equaliser.

The Blues' Brazilian centre-half Alex then coolly scored in the 66th minute but Denmark centre-half Martin Laursen volleyed in from a corner six minutes later.

Chelsea defender Ricardo Carvalho was sent off for a two-footed tackle on Gabriel Agbonlahor.

Ballack scored a free kick in the 88th minute before Blues left-back Ashley Cole was sent off for a handball on the line and Villa captain Gareth Barry scored the injury-time equaliser from the resulting penalty.

Villa had enjoyed the better of the early chances and opened the scoring when John Carew's header from an Agbonlahor cross allowed the unmarked Maloney to slide in and score at the far post.

Matters worsened for the hosts in the 26th minute when England midfielder Frank Lampard was forced off with a thigh injury. Germany captain Ballack replaced him, making only his second appearance of the season.

Villa then doubled their lead, Maloney going past Paulo Ferreira and Alex before blasting his shot at Cech.

The goalkeeper went down on one knee in an attempt to catch the ball, but fluffed his effort, sending the ball spinning into the goal.

The goal was the Malaysia-born Maloney's fifth in 19 league games for his club since joining from Celtic, O'Neill's old team, in January.

The match then swung in Chelsea's favour. Knight clipped Ballack's feet in the penalty area, sparking minutes

of mayhem in the penalty box as players argued around referee Phil Dowd.

He duly sent off the limping Knight and Shevchenko converted the resulting penalty.

The sending off forced O'Neill to reshuffle his pack at half time. Maloney was sacrificed with defender Curtis Davies coming on. Chelsea were still on a high and equalised within five minutes of the break.

Kalou passed to Shevchenko, who blasted a splendid shot past Carson from 25 yards for his fourth league goal of the season.

And the hosts scored again when Shevchenko held off Barry and played in Alex, who continued his run into the penalty box, skipping past Davies before firing past Carson.

The lead lasted just six minutes. Young's inswinging corner found Laursen in the box, who sent a right-footed volley past Cech to equalise, setting up a frenzied last 10 minutes.

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## Owen to be used sparingly

INTERNET, undated

Sam Allardyce will use Michael Owen 'sparingly' upon the Newcastle United striker's return to action.

Owen has been out for six weeks with a thigh injury suffered while playing for England in a friendly with Austria in mid-November.

He is back in training and could feature at some stage for the Magpies during the Christmas and New Year period.

But Newcastle boss Allardyce is wary about Owen suffering a setback and appears likely to adopt a cautious approach to the forward's comeback.

"Owen is still ahead of time," said Allardyce in the Daily Mirror. "We said six weeks when it first happened. He is back in the fold again."

"Any player who gets injured on a regular basis, it is our concern to try and avoid that situation as much as possible. It does not come overnight, prevention of injuries is a slow process."

"It is a challenge when you have a quality player of that nature who is as bitterly disappointed as we are that he is getting little niggly injuries."

"It is not as if they are serious injuries like he had before. So that is another challenge compared to what he used to have."

"But he is fit again and hopefully that will be the end of it for a decent period of time."

"He has worked very, very hard again to get back in the squad and now it is about keeping him available for selection as much as possible, and keeping his core strength and his availability open to us on a regular basis."

"A goalscorer like him could be major for us. We are building him up and using him sparingly at first. Hopefully that will build up match fitness and stave off any injuries."

## England beckons young booters

Football

SPORTS REPORTER

The local footballers under Canary Wharf's youth development programme will be given a great opportunity to travel to England next year for a month-long advanced training.

Canary Wharf, a British-based group which sponsors the four-year football development programme in Bangladesh, promised to send at least 15 players out of the 34-member camp to London's David Beckham Academy in May next year.

"We will take the players to England for four weeks in May, 2008. They will also receive advanced training at Arsenal and West Ham's academies. We have been trying to take all 34 players

but so far, we have ensured at least 15 players will go," said Zakir Khan, community affairs manager of Canary Wharf yesterday.

He was talking to reporters at the BKSP, where British aviation minister Jim Fitzpatrick, MP, went to visit the 18-month-old youth camp.

Fitzpatrick, on a personal visit to Bangladesh, enjoyed a superb day out and also scored the lone goal -- a spectacular headed effort by the 55-year-old -- for the Canary Wharf trainees in an exhibition match against veteran footballers featuring the likes of Aslam, Sabbir and Kaiser Hamid.

The ex-booters won the match 3-1 with Imtiaz Sultan Johnny, Imtiaz Ahmed Nabik and Jamal scoring one goal apiece.

"Canary Wharf has been working for the development of Tower Hamlets in east London. I hope it will be able to make a great con-

tribution in development of football here. We will help it as far as we can," said the Labour Party MP.

Canary Wharf's strategic advisor Howard Dawber said that the organisation has been considering prospects of building a football academy in Bangladesh.

"Nothing has been finalised about the academy yet. But we will talk with Emirates and Clifton Group about it," he said.

It was learned that the Canary Wharf officials will visit the United Arab Emirates on their way back to England to talk with their Emirates counterparts.

Clifton group is a British-based group owned by Bangladeshi expatriates.

Chief coach of the camp Golam Sarwar Tipu, meanwhile, was optimistic about the future of his

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British Aviation Minister Jim Fitzpatrick (second from right) hands over a jersey to a young footballer of the Canary Wharf coaching camp at the BKSP yesterday. PHOTO: STAR

## Milan sanction Ronaldo talks

INTERNET, undated

Brazilian giants Flamengo claim they have started negotiations with Milan to sign striker Ronaldo.

After agreeing a six-month loan deal for Internazionale striker Adriano last week, Flamengo have now set their sights on another big-name signing.

Flamengo president Kleber Leite told www.globoesporte.com that talks have begun over acquiring the 31-year-old Brazil striker from the European and recently-crowned FIFA Club World Cup champions.

"Flamengo have been authorised by Milan to talk to Ronaldo," said Leite. "We've had a preliminary conversation and noticed he wants to change the direction of his life."

The 1994 and 2002 World Cup winner has recently undergone fitness tests with Brazil team doctor Jose Luiz Runco after suffering some pains in his left shin.

"I have a good opinion of Ronaldo. He needs to play, whether that is in Brazil or anywhere else," Runco said.

Leite used Runco's words to tantalise fans over the possible signing, adding: "Both we and Ronaldo are interested and Runco has already given a positive medical report."

## Referee pulls out gun!

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

A Malaysian referee took out his gun and fired warning shots in the air after a local soccer match turned unruly following the suspension of a player, a newspaper said on Tuesday.

The referee, who was also a policeman, ran to his patrol car to get his gun after players mobbed him for showing the red-card to one of them, the New Straits Times said.

"We are investigating as to whether the policeman was justified in taking out his firearm and discharging it, and also why he had it with him during the match," it quoted Hussin Ismail, police chief in the southern Johor state, as saying.

The policemen was taken into custody for suspected misuse of firearms.

Five players, aged between 23 and 40, were also being held for questioning and could be charged for rioting, the paper said.

## Old boys not keen on return

INTERNET, undated

Argentine club River Plate are keen to repatriate Zaragoza players Roberto Ayala, Pablo Aimar and Andres D'Alessandro, the AS sports daily said on its website on Wednesday. AS said that new River Plate coach Diego Simeone is keen to sign the Zaragoza trio - all of whom started their careers at River, in the 1990s - in order to bring some experience into his young squad.

However, it seems that the Zaragoza trio are reluctant to return to Argentine football, despite the poor situation of their Spanish club.

Zaragoza spent heavily this summer - on Ayala and D'Alessandro, among others - but have made a poor start and are ninth in La Liga, and are already eliminated from the UEFA Cup.

Coach Victor Fernandez is under massive pressure. It is rumoured that he will be sacked if the troubled team loses heavily away to leaders Real Madrid on January 6.

Fernandez has had several training-ground arguments with the explosive D'Alessandro, who was suspended by the club for four days in November because of his indiscipline.

## Santini linked to Iran

INTERNET, undated

Former Tottenham coach Jacques Santini has emerged as a potential contender to take charge of the Iran national team according to the Iran Football Federation's transitory committee.

The IFF confirmed that Santini and Portuguese coach Artur Jorge are possible options to lead Iran in the upcoming 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

The duo have come to an overall agreement with the transitory committee members, but both are still undecided over the financial terms of the proposal.

Santini, who had a spell in charge at Spurs in 2004, has asked for 1.5 million (£1.1 million) to sign a one-year deal.

However, IFF officials have not yet confirmed who will be chosen to take charge of Team Melli.

## Wenger all for video trials

Football

THE INDEPENDENT

Arsene Wenger has upped the ante in the growing debate over the verbal abuse of players and managers by supporters by saying errant fans should be filmed and their families forced to view the results.

It would be a novel if not wholly practical solution to the problem but such is Wenger's undoubted frustration over the subject, born of having suffered himself over the years, that the Arsenal manager feels action of some sort should be taken.

"Most of it is abusive but why do people get away with it?" Wenger said. "Because they are in the mass of people. Sometimes the best [thing to do] is to film them and show the DVD to their family at home. That is the way to deal with it."

Wenger is not saying that either players or managers should be immune from criticism, but he believes a line should be drawn on what is acceptable.

"They are entitled to an opinion," he said of supporters. "They can say to the manager, 'You are useless', but you cannot say, 'You

are a fucking bastard'."

It is highly unusual to hear Wenger swear but to do so demonstrates his anger. "I personally, I think I have a long and heavy experience of it," he said, in reference to the abuse he has suffered since his arrival in English football 11 years ago. There have been nasty terrace chants and taunts based on totally unfounded personal allegations which continue to this day.

The Manchester United manager, Sir Alex Ferguson, complained over abuse he suffered at the Emirates Stadium earlier this season, prompting Wenger to say that he could detail a long history of such behaviour at Old Trafford. More recently, Portsmouth's Harry Redknapp reacted angrily at Villa Park and Sol Campbell called the BBC last week to ask to be interviewed about the issue after again suffering the attentions of supporters of his former club, Tottenham Hotspur.

"Sol has a big point," Wenger said of the man he signed from Spurs. "Why should we not be respected just because we are on the pitch? I agree completely with him."

The pair will meet later today when Wenger takes Arsenal to Fratton Park as they try to maintain

their slender lead at the top of the Premier League. In fact, by the time they kick off this evening they could be trailing Manchester United, who face Sunderland, and Roy Keane, earlier in the day. Keane also weighed into the debate over the abuse of players last week.

Wenger's resources are wearing a little thin and his team were fortunate to gain three points against Spurs on Saturday. But, with the African Nations Cup looming, which will deprive him of Kolo Toure and Emmanuel Eboué, Wenger said he did not expect to sign another central defender in the January transfer window. He could also lose Alex Song if the Cameroonian is called up, so Johan Djourou has been recalled from Birmingham City.

"We could be left short," Wenger said. "Even with Johan we would then be left with just three special-centre-backs. If I signed another one we'd have too many after the African Cup of Nations. Sometimes you just have to suffer during the tournament and let your players play."

Wenger, who must resist attempts by Lassana Diarra to leave he is attracting interest from Spurs may play Gilberto Silva as a makeshift centre-half.

## WI ride on Gayle

Cricket

AFP, Port Elizabeth

Captain Chris Gayle smashed an explosive half-century as the West Indies made a good start on the first day of the first Test against South Africa at St George's Park Wednesday.

The West Indies were 190 for three at tea after being sent in to bat on what proved to be an easy-paced pitch.

Gayle hammered 66 off 48 balls in his first innings since injuring his right hamstring against Zimbabwe 26 days ago.

Mainly through Gayle, who was a doubtful starter until declaring himself fit shortly before the start, the West Indies raced to 130 for two at lunch but the scoring rate slowed after the break as the South Africans opted for a more defensive bowling line.

Only 60 runs were added in 28 overs between lunch and tea but importantly for the West Indies, who have been criticised for a lack of batting discipline, they only lost one wicket.

Gayle and Daren Ganga put on 98 for the first wicket in just 16 overs but both were out within the space of three balls.

Ganga edged a drive at a wide ball from Andre Nel and was caught behind by Mark Boucher after making 33 off 57 deliveries with four fours.

In the next over Gayle cracked left-arm spinner Paul Harris' first ball of the match through extra cover for four but was then caught at slip by Jacques Kallis when he attempted to drive the next ball. He hit 13 boundaries.

Runako Morton and Marlon Samuels put on 64 for the third wicket but it became slow going before Morton was caught at backward point off Makhaya Ntini for 33 off a ball that bounced higher than expected and looped off a thick edge.

Samuels was 44 not out at tea. He was twice "caught" at first slip off Dale Steyn, on 14 and 20, but was firstly saved by a call of no-ball, which initially he did not hear, and on the second occasion because

the ball looped off his right glove after he had taken it off his bat.

Gayle barely managed a jog in his pre-match fitness trial but after a discussion with coach John Dyson he took his place as West Indian captain for the first time in a Test match.

He put the injury to the test when he scored his first run with a sharp single off Steyn, having to dive to make the crease, but then

played a typical Gayle innings, pounding the ball mainly off the back foot with minimal footwork to race to his half-century off 42 balls.

Both Gayle and Ganga scored boundaries off inside edges early in their innings but otherwise were seldom troubled as new ball bowlers Steyn and Makhaya Ntini both struggled to make an impression.

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BANGI West Indies captain Chris Gayle pulls the ball over mid-wicket during his scintillating 66 against South Africa on the opening day of the first Test at St George's Park in Port Elizabeth on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

## Almunia eyeing England switch

Football

AFP, London

Spanish goalkeeper Manuel Almunia has refused to rule out switching his national colours to England.

The 30-year-old Arsenal keeper was born in Pamplona but is yet to receive a call from Spain's national team boss Luis Aragones, and in a year he will qualify for England.

One of the first tasks for new England coach Fabio Capello will be to solve his own goalkeeping conundrum with Paul Robinson and Scott Carson having committed expensive errors during the doomed Euro 2008 qualifying campaign.

Almunia is currently the in-form goalkeeper in the Premier League after his penalty save in the

2-1 win over Tottenham at the weekend, but Capello will have to wait another year to pick him.

"I will study my situation," said Almunia.

"Spain have never called me. And, if other people want me, I have to study my situation and take a decision because it is good for me; I will not close myself to anything."

"I would be very pleased to take a decision that would make me happy and my family happy."

"I always say I have to wait until that moment to see what is happening at that moment, or which goalkeeper England has, or which goalkeeper Spain has - look at the situation and take a decision."

Almunia admitted it would be a tough decision to turn his back on his country.

"But that's football," he said. "It

would be a big decision but I wouldn't care if I had two days to take it."

Arsenal are top of the Premier League but Almunia feels there is plenty to come from Arsene Wenger's side.

"We are not playing too well now, but we have taken three points against Spurs at the weekend," he said.

"I think we have to improve away from home because now we have two consecutive games which are very, very difficult, Portsmouth (Wednesday) and Everton (Saturday)."

"After those two games, we will show how strong is Arsenal or what Arsenal can win this year."

"The season is long, but at the moment, we have played 18 games and we are at the top, and that means something."