

Lehmann hints at retirement

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann has hinted he could retire after this summer's European Championships - but still believes he has a part to play in the Gunners' end-of-season push for honours.

The Germany international has spent much of the season on the Arsenal bench after losing his place to Manuel Almunia, but he remains confident his experience can help Arsene Wenger's side as they attempt to win both the Barclays Premier League and the Champions League.

After that, though, Lehmann appears to be contemplating bringing his playing days to an end.

"I don't know what I will do after the summer," he told www.fifa.com.

"I will play the European Championships and then it depends on whether I get a good offer. If I do, I might play on another two years, and if not, I probably might retire.

"It is very difficult (to be on the bench), very hard, particularly when I see the performances on the pitch. Sometimes you have to accept it - even after I played a couple of games and was dropped again."

The 38-year-old was close to leaving for Borussia Dortmund in January but opted to stay for both personal and professional reasons.

"I was very close (to leaving) but I stayed for several reasons. My experience from AC Milan, who I left too early, was one thing, and my family situation - I didn't want to take my kids out of school here. There was also the belief that I still can win something here and be part of it."

The Germany stopper admitted he does not enjoy a close relationship with Almunia, claiming it is hard to maintain friendships at top-level clubs.

"When you compete with some guys they can't separate the professional aspect from the personal. So there is no big friendship (with Almunia) but that does not worry me."

"You can have friendships in football in smaller clubs where you know you have to stick together and you know that you are so dependent on each other. In bigger clubs another guy comes in, delivers the same quality and you don't care about the first guy any more."

"I socialised with Thierry Henry and Freddie Ljungberg sometimes, but right now when you look at the squad there is only Gilberto Silva who is near my age and has children."

Mascherano still can't believe it

AFP, Liverpool

Javier Mascherano insisted on Monday he still had no idea why he'd been sent off in Liverpool's 3-0 defeat away to champions Manchester United.

Liverpool's loss, which effectively put paid to any lingering Premier League title ambitions they may have had this season, was overshadowed at Old Trafford on Sunday by the sight of Argentina midfielder Mascherano getting his marching orders from referee Steve Bennett shortly before half-time.

Mascherano, who could yet receive more than the standard one-game ban because he failed to leave the pitch immediately after being red-carded, had already been booked for a foul when he persisted in asking why team-mate Fernando Torres had also been cautioned.

Bennett did not take kindly to this and gave Mascherano his second booking for dissent.

Despite what happened, Mascherano told the Liverpool Echo here on Monday: "I do not know why I was sent off. I asked the referee what was happening. I did not swear, I was not aggressive and I did not confront him."

"All I did was ask him what was happening, nothing else."

Mascherano visibly lost his temper after being shown the red card and had to be calmed down by manager Rafael Benitez and other members of the Liverpool coaching staff before accepting he had to leave the field.

"When he (Bennett) showed me the second yellow card and sent me off I could not believe it," Mascherano said.

"I am sorry to my team-mates because that meant we went down to 10 men - and that made things even more difficult for us (Liverpool were only 1-0 down at the time)."

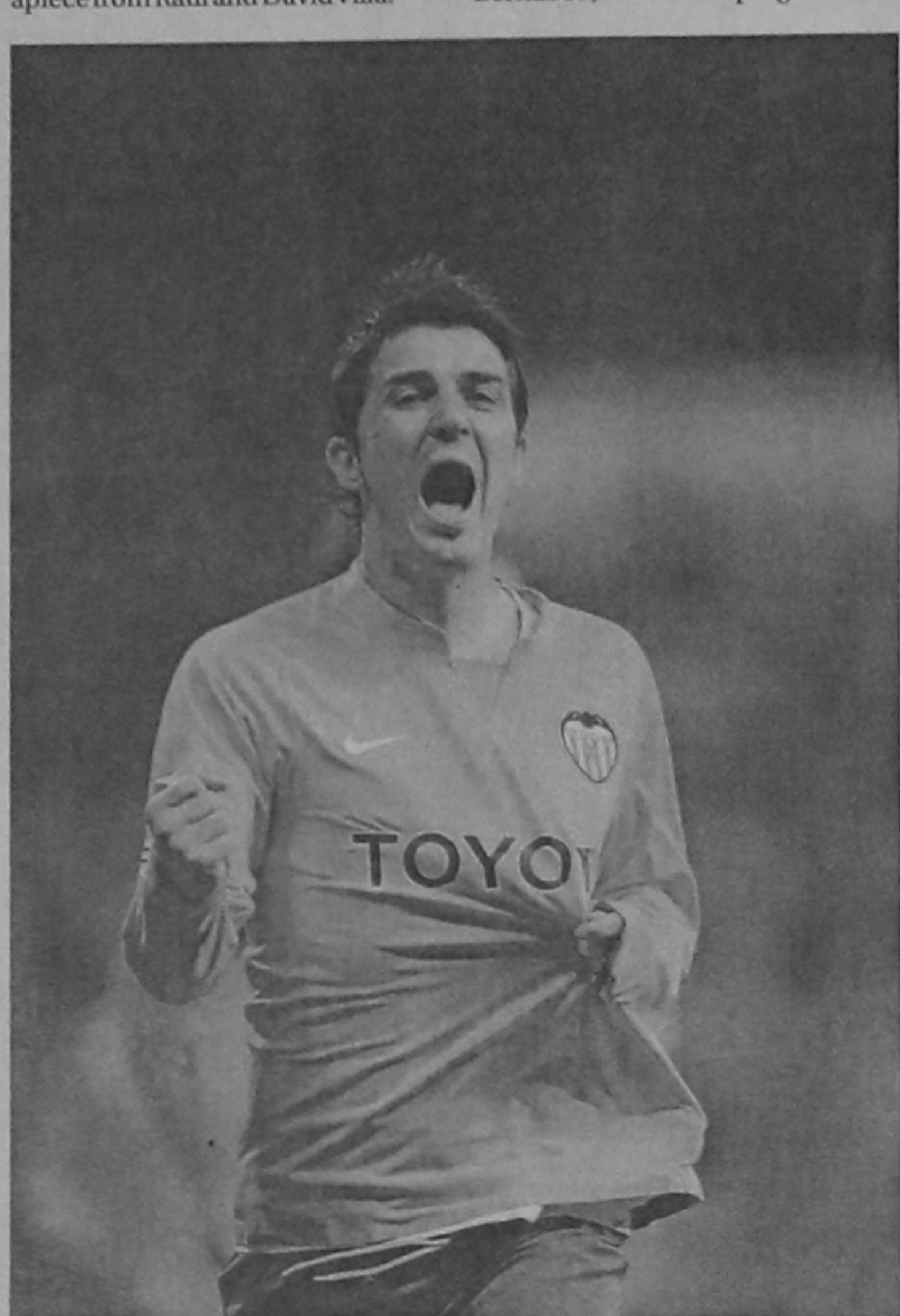
Valencia now scalp Real

REUTERS, Madrid



Barcelona closed to within four points of Real Madrid at the top of the Primera Liga on Sunday after the leaders lost 3-2 at home to Valencia while the Catalans beat Valladolid 4-1 at the Nou Camp.

Real slipped to only their second home defeat of the season when former Atletico Madrid forward Angel Arizmendi struck a dramatic 89th-minute winner in a frenetic encounter which featured two goals apiece from Raul and David Villa.



Spanish striker David Villa is ecstatic after scoring his second goal to tie up the game against Real Madrid during their Primera Liga clash at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.

Bernd Schuster's side, who have lost five of their last eight games, lead the table on 62 points. Barca follow on 58, while Villarreal, 2-1 winners at basement side Levante, are in third spot on 56.

"There are lots of ways to lose a game and this was a huge disappointment," Schuster told reporters after the game.

"We are suffering too many defeats and are paying a heavy price for the few errors we are making."

Atletico Madrid tightened their grip on the final Champions League berth with a 2-1 win at Sevilla on Saturday, their first win at the Sanchez Pizjuan in over 15 years.

Valencia were first to strike at the Bernabeu, Villa sweeping the ball

past Iker Casillas 11 minutes from the break after he had beaten the offside trap to latch on to a clever through ball from David Silva.

But their celebrations were cut short when Raul equalised just over a minute later, heading in from six metres out after he got the better of former club colleague Ivan Helguera who had come on as a substitute moments earlier.

The Real skipper took his tally for the season to 15 when he struck again early in the second half, squeezing a shot inside the post after Guti had threaded the ball through the Valencia defence.

But Valencia, who reached the final of the King's Cup after a 4-3 win over Barcelona in midweek, caused plenty of problems for the Real defence with their fast-breaking attacks and Fabio Cannavaro gave away a penalty when he pushed Silva in the back.

Villa sent Casillas the wrong way with his spot kick to make it 2-2 with his second.

Real peppered the Valencia goal with shots in a frantic final quarter.

But German keeper Timo Hildebrand pulled off a succession of brilliant reflex saves to deny the home side and Arizmendi completed a great week for Ronald Koeman's side when he rounded Cannavaro and beat Casillas at the near post with a pin-point shot.

Barcelona claimed their first win in four outings thanks to an outstanding display from Spain under-21 forward Kiki.

The Catalans had headed into the match under heavy pressure after taking just one point from their previous three league games and losing to Valencia in the Cup.

They looked edgy after Valladolid midfielder Jonathan Sesma had cancelled out a Samuel Eto'o goal with a penalty on the half hour, but Andres Iniesta settled their nerves when he restored their lead at the start of the second half.

Kiki made it 3-1, clipping in from a tight angle just after the hour and then capped an outstanding display when he poked home from a metre out after Eto'o had swerved round the keeper and slid a pass across the face of the goal.

Relegation-threatened Real Murcia claimed their first win since Javier Clemente took charge as coach at the start of the month with an emphatic 4-0 win at home to Espanyol.

PHOTO: AFP

'Del Piero deserves call-up'

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Alessandro Del Piero's impressive form at club level cannot be indefinitely ignored by Italy coach Roberto Donadoni, according to Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri.

Del Piero's good form for Juventus this season has failed to impress Donadoni who again left the striker out of his squad, named on Saturday, for the world championships friendly in Spain on Wednesday.

Ranieri said the 33-year-old Del Piero, capped 85 times by Italy but who has not played for his country since giving a poor performance in a goalless Euro 2008 qualifier against France in September, can still make an important contribution at international level.

"Maybe Donadoni is waiting to call him up at the right time, at the European championship," he said. "He deserves it. He is having an

exceptional season and a player like him always comes in handy for a coach."

In helping Juventus to a memorable 2-1 win over leaders Inter Milan at the San Siro on Saturday, Del Piero equalled Gaetano Scirea's record of 552 appearances for the Turin giants.

Del Piero's hopes of forcing his way back into Italy's squad for the Euro 2008 finals in June in Switzerland and Austria appear to be fading. But, with things going well at club level, he is not letting the situation get him down.

"Donadoni didn't call me this time. Last time he did and he explained his decision, but I'm happy, it was a beautiful match," he told Sky television after Saturday's game, which puts promoted Juve 10 points behind Inter and six behind AS Roma in third place.

It has taken 15 years for Del Piero to reach the tally notched up in the 1970s and 80s by the late Scirea, considered one of Italy's best ever defenders and a member

of the 1982 World Cup-winning team.

Del Piero surpassed Giamperio Boniperti's record as the club's all-time top scorer in 2006, and has since taken his Juventus total up to 231 goals.

Earlier this month Del Piero and another illustrious national-team reject, French striker David Trezeguet, overtook Omar Sivori and John Charles to become Juve's most prolific strike partnership in Serie A.

They have amassed total of 198 top-flight goals since they started playing together in 2000, two more than Italian-Argentine Sivori and Welsh striker Charles scored between 1957 and 1962.

With three years left on his contract, Del Piero has plenty of time to set goal and appearance records for Juventus that will not be broken for a very long time.

And, fired by never-faltering self-belief, the forward's days of service for national team may not be over yet.

Spain wait on Torres

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain are hoping to see glimpses of the Fernando Torres that has taken the English Premier League by storm when they meet world champions Italy in Elche on Wednesday (kickoff 2100 GMT).

The 24-year-old has chalked up 27 goals since moving from Atletico Madrid to Liverpool last July but he has yet to show the same effectiveness in front of goal when he dons the red shirt of Spain.

Torres has found the net just twice in the last 18 months for Spain and his total of 15 goals in 46 games is a relatively modest one for an international striker.

However, Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro believes Torres has become a far better player since moving to England.

"Fernando Torres has made an incredible improvement," the Real Madrid defender told La Gazzetta dello Sport.

"Last year I saw him as a bit of a softie, someone who hid, but then he went to the Premier League, where you can't be a softie, and exploded."

Torres himself admits that he needed to leave Atletico in order to develop as a player.

"I saw that I had done all I could and that things weren't getting any better," he told Spanish television

station La Sexta. "I needed to play in the Champions League, aspire to win things and feel like an important player recognised outside Spain and that's why I had to leave."

As well as Torres, Spanish eyes will also be on his club colleague Alvaro Arbeloa, Getafe midfielder Ruben de la Red and Real Mallorca defender Fernando Navarro, all of whom could win their first caps in Wednesday's match.

Valencia defender Carlos Marchena is a doubt after suffering a blow to the head during his side's 3-2 win over Real Madrid on Sunday.

The game is Spain's last match before they announce their squad for Euro 2008, but coach Luis Aragones has made it clear that there are likely to be further changes before the tournament.

"This list isn't definitive," Aragones said on Saturday. "Any player that is in form could be called up."

The Italy squad is dominated by players from AS Roma (Christian Panucci, Alberto Aquilani, Daniele De Rossi, Simone Perrotta) and AC Milan (Massimo Ambrosini, Massimo Oddo, Gennaro Gattuso, Andrea Pirlo).

But coach Roberto Donadoni may be tempted to tilt the balance in his starting line-up in favour of the contingent from Roma, who are 15 points ahead of AC Milan in the Serie A and are the only Italian team to have reached the Champions League

quarterfinals.

Inter Milan Marco Materazzi should get his first run out since injuring his thigh injury playing in a 3-1 defeat by Hungary in an August friendly.

Trezeguet gets lifeline

INTERNET, undated

David Trezeguet's hopes of making France's Euro 2008 squad have been reignited after coach Raymond Domenech called him into the squad for Wednesday's friendly against England.

The Juventus striker, whose last game for Les Bleus was a defeat to Scotland in September, had all but given up playing for France again after he was left out of the 39-man squad to face Mali on Tuesday and England 24 hours later.

But Karim Benzema withdrew after suffering a knee injury in Lyon's victory over Paris St Germain on Sunday, opening the door for Trezeguet.

Trezeguet - who has 70 caps to his name - scored the goal which won Euro 2000 for France and was also part of the 1998 World Cup-winning squad.

The 30-year-old is Juve's top scorer in Serie A this season with 17 goals in 28 appearances - including the winner in Sunday's 2-1 victory at Inter.

Becks can buy LA Galaxy

INTERNET, undated

David Beckham has an option to buy his own football team in the US when his contract with Los Angeles Galaxy runs out, according to US reports.

The 32-year-old midfielder will be able to purchase a stake in his own Major League Soccer franchise in 2011, at the end of his Galaxy contract, CBS's 60 minutes reported.

Speaking on the documentary, Beckham described his first year with his new team as a "nightmare".

Beckham, who could earn his 100th England cap on Wednesday night against France, insisted his move to the US was not a form of "semi-retirement".

"I'm passionate about the game, I'm passionate about this move, and I'm passionate about the fact that the sport can grow here and the potential is huge here," he said.

But he admitted the MLS, where he will start his second season on Saturday, will not be transformed within six months or a year.

He said it would take "five, 10 years".

Asked about his injury-laden first season, which saw him play just five games, he said: "It was a nightmare to be honest."

However, he insisted his commercial deals "never" interfere with his performance on the pitch.

"That's one thing that I've always been able to keep separate," he said.

"The commercial things that I do, they're always set aside, they're always second to my football... second obviously to my 'soccer' sorry, I'm trying to get used to it."

Rijkaard stands by Ronaldinho

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard has spoken out in support of Ronaldinho, insisting he still has faith in the troubled Brazilian.

Ronaldinho has played just seven full games in 28 league fixtures so far this season, and has been repeatedly linked with a move away from the Nou Camp - with AC Milan and Chelsea among several clubs reportedly interested in him.

The 27-year-old, who has been dogged by injuries this campaign, has seemed a shadow of his former self over the past year but Rijkaard claims Ronaldinho is still very much part of Barca's future.

"Above all I consider him a great person with a great character," he told Spanish sports daily AS.

"And more than his football qualities he has given a lot to his teammates, to the club and to the fans."

"I don't want to say that there's a relationship, but after so many years working together I hold him dear and I always want well for him."

"I respect him a lot."

Ronaldinho missed Barca's 4-1 victory over Real Valladolid on Sunday and the midweek cup defeat to Valencia, having also sat out the previous Primera Liga match in Almeria after complaining of pain in his left thigh.

A scan later revealed the Brazil international was not suffering from an injury, but Rijkaard refused to criticise the former world player of the year.

"The player has some pains and we hope that he will recover as soon as possible," the Dutchman added.

"We have to believe the player."

Ronaldo has given a lot to Barca."

England out in force

AFP, London

Fears of fresh withdrawals from the England squad were allayed Monday when all 23 players selected by manager Fabio Capello arrived at London Colney for a training session ahead of the friendly international away to France.

There had been concerns that, with all the top four Premier League teams in action on Sunday, Capello's preparations for Wednesday's match in Paris were in danger of being disrupted by a series of injuries.

However midfielder Frank Lampard, despite sustaining a hip problem in Chelsea's 2-1 win over London rivals Arsenal which saw the Blues go second in the table, was among the first out onto a snow-covered pitch at the Gunners' training ground.

Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney, shrugging off concerns he may have been injured during the leaders 3-0 victory over Liverpool at Old Trafford, also took part.

Meanwhile former England captain David Beckham, who earlier in the season trained with Arsenal at Colney, was involved after flying in from the west coast of the United States where he now plays for LA Galaxy.

Wenger a worried man

REUTERS, London



Manager Arsene Wenger said Arsenal's Premier League title chances had suffered a major blow with Sunday's 2-1 defeat by Chelsea in the London derby.

Arsenal slipped to third in the table and six points adrift of leaders Manchester United after Chelsea came from a goal down to win with two strikes from Ivorian Didier Drogba.

Asked about its impact on a title bid that was firmly on course just a month ago, Wenger told a news conference: "It's a big setback today for us."

"When you add the four games we drew, and to lose today, we have to get back to winning games before we dream of the title."

"I feel the spirit is fantastic in the team. Today the players will be very disappointed because they gave everything to win this game and we go home without a point."

"We have to show our strength. At the moment we are six points behind Man United and we have first to win our next game before we

can speak about the title."

Wenger had no doubts about where his side, who have won only one of their last eight games, need to improve.

"We have to become stronger again defensively," the Frenchman said.

"It's a game we should have won, but we have shown lapses in concentration that we paid for."

"At the moment we have some defensive problems that we have to sort out because we gave away an easy goal at Middlesbrough and an easy goal against Aston Villa."

"We got caught when (Chelsea substitute Nicolas) Anelka came on with the long balls and physical battle - and I must say we were a bit unlucky because the first goal was offside."

Chelsea manager Avram Grant was cautious over whether his side, now second and five points behind United, could go on and win the league for a third time in four seasons.

"I don't know, but we will do our best to," said the Israeli, who replaced crowd favourite Jose Mourinho last September.

"Since September, we have had 80 per cent good games and we

have scored a lot of goals. It's important."

"Today, we conceded a goal... but they responded very well."

The turning point came midway through the second half, when Arsenal lost defender and goalscorer Bacary Sagna to injury while leading 1-0 and Grant sent on Anelka and Juliano Belletti.

Drogba's goals soon followed, confounding sceptics in the Stamford Bridge crowd.

Asked about his substitutions, Grant said: "I don't think any manager thinks it will succeed every time. Today it did, so I'm happy... We wanted to put more pressure on their defence."

Grant said he had turned a deaf ear to crowd chants at the time of "You don't know what you're doing."

"I didn't hear them," he said. "I concentrate on what I need to do, and I'm very confident about what I need to do. I cannot listen to other voices."

Asked if he heard the crowd singing predecessor Jose Mourinho's name, Grant said: "I was concentrating only on the game."

A Serbian double

Tennis

AFP, Indian Wells

Novak Djokovic and Ana Ivanovic delivered a sparkling Serbian double on Sunday, their convincing victories at the Pacific Life Open reaffirming their nation's arrival on the tennis map.

Djokovic, the third-ranked player in the world, had already become a national hero with his triumph at the Australian Open, where Ivanovic finished runner-up in her second Grand Slam final.

On Sunday, third-seeded Djokovic downed unseeded American Mardy Fish 6-2, 5-7, 6-3 to win the first of the prestigious ATP Masters Series events of the year.

Ivanovic, the top seed in the WTA portion of the 5.7 million-

dollar tournament, defeated second-seeded Svetlana Kuznetsova 6-4, 6-3 to lift the women's trophy.

For good measure, third-seeded Serbian Jelena Jankovic made it to the women's semifinals, and Nenad Zimonjic was a doubles finalist.

One wag quipped that Indian Wells should be renamed Serbian Wells.

"This is something I think that we absolutely deserve," Djokovic said. "We've been working very hard to throughout all of our lives, and this is just a crown for our work, and it's paying off."

He said he hoped his success and that of his compatriots on the tennis courts would buoy a country that is now in some turmoil.

"Considering the fact that our country is in a very difficult position, they are struggling economi-



PHOTO: AFP

Serbian star Ana Ivanovic poses for photographers with the Pacific Life Open Championship trophy while the Serbia flag flutters in the background after beating Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova in the final at Indian Wells on Sunday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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