

Rooney set for return

AFP, Manchester

Wayne Rooney is set to return to action for Manchester United against West Ham at Old Trafford here Saturday according to manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

England forward Rooney missed United's 1-0 win at home to Barcelona on Tuesday, which saw the club into the Champions League final, because of a hip injury sustained during last weekend's Premier League defeat against Chelsea.

United boss Ferguson, who will keep a close eye on Rooney's fitness over the next few days, said Wednesday: "He (Rooney) may have a chance for Saturday."

"We just cancelled him out yesterday (Tuesday), he was in a lot of pain."

"It was his hip joint, he was never close to playing. It was out of the question," the Scot added.

"He will be a lot better in a few days and involved on Saturday somewhere along the line."

Patrice Evra is expected to recover from a knock but his fellow defender Nemanja Vidic remains doubtful with a facial injury sustained during a collision with Chelsea striker Didier Drogba at Stamford Bridge.

"Vidic is under the control of the doctor. He got a bit of concussion, so we have to be careful of that," said Ferguson. "He may have a chance for Saturday."

Reigning English champions United top the Premier League on goal difference alone after second-placed Chelsea drew level on 81 points with two games to go after their 2-1 win over Ferguson's men last Saturday.

Victory for United over the Hammers would up the pressure on Chelsea as the Blues don't play in the Premier League again until Monday, when they are up against Newcastle.

Bremen, Klasnic call truce

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen and their striker Ivan Klasnic called a truce Tuesday following an emergency meeting after the Croatia international launched a 1.5 million euros (2.3 million US dollars) lawsuit over the mishandling of his kidney complaint.

Werder's director of sport Klaus Allofs and coach Thomas Schaaf met with Klasnic and his lawyers for several hours to discuss the legal action as well as recent comments made by Klasnic's wife, Patricia.

"We could have better reacted in some situations, the matter has been addressed and cleared up," said the club in an official statement.

And Klasnic's lawyer said the striker had not criticised the club directly in comments made over the weekend.

"The player had said: 'The people who have created this shit... will atone for it' in a press report here."

"I state clearly all comments made were directed exclusively against the doctors concerned, not against the club," Klasnic said in a statement.

The 28-year-old forward became the first professional footballer to return to international competition following a kidney transplant in March 2007.

Klasnic has launched a lawsuit for "gross negligence" against sports doctor Goetz Dimanski and cardiologist Manju Guha, who work on behalf of Werder Bremen, for failing to identify his kidney complaint earlier.

The club then called Tuesday's meeting with Klasnic after him and his wife appeared on German television channel ARD on Monday night with Patricia particularly strong in criticising Bremen's treatment of her husband.

"The complete lack of understanding really grated me, I just couldn't get my head around it," fumed Mrs Klasnic.

"I missed receiving a phone call, an inquiry, 'how are you and your husband?'"

"Every normal human being would have already asked out of politeness."

Klasnic's lawyer has collected medical evidence to show the player's kidney was only 67 per cent effective as early as 2001 when he signed for Bremen.

After suffering renal failure, Klasnic had a first kidney transplant in January 2007 after his mother donated an organ, but his body later rejected it.

A second kidney donated by his father was transplanted in March and Klasnic missed most of last year, only making his return for Bremen in late November 2007.

He returned to international football in Croatia's draw with Scotland in a friendly in March.

Werder Bremen still use the doctors to help with their squads' medical problems, but Klasnic has refused to deal with them ever again.

Klasnic is out of contract with Bremen at the end of the season and Bundesliga rivals Hannover 96 have expressed an interest in signing the Croat.

Ribery stays confident



AFP, St Petersburg

French midfielder Franck Ribery insists Bayern Munich have nothing to fear when they tackle Zenit St Petersburg in Thursday night's UEFA Cup semifinal, second leg in Russia.

The 25-year-old scored a stunning goal - he curled his shot home from 35 yards - in Sunday's 4-1 Bundesliga win over VfB Stuttgart.

But Bayern must score in St Petersburg to stay in the competition having drawn last week's first leg 1-1 in Munich.

The Bundesliga leaders have their sights set on a domestic and European clean sweep.

They would be the first German side to do so if they add the Bundesliga and UEFA Cup to the German League Cup and German Cup titles they have already won.

However their hopes of appearing in the Manchester final on May 14 took a dent when Lucio's own goal gave the Russian side a 1-1 first-leg draw in Bavaria last Thursday.

But with Ribery and Italian World Cup striker Luca Toni in

form, Bayern travel to Russia in determined mood.

"We'll go there with confidence," said Ribery.

"There's still everything to play for and we aren't afraid of any team, even on their ground."

Bayern can draw inspiration from fellow German side Bayer Leverkusen, who triumphed 1-0 at the Petrovsky Stadium in the quarterfinal, despite a 4-1 defeat from the first leg.

Dutch coach Dick Advocaat's Zenit side - the current Russian league leaders and reigning champions - have been tough to beat at home and are hoping to become only the second side from Russia to win the UEFA Cup.

While Bayern were in action on Sunday, Zenit's game against FC Terek Grozny was postponed until July 1 to give Advocaat's side extra time to prepare.

And Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld has given his team a clean bill of health.

Goalkeeper Oliver Kahn and defender Philipp Lahm have shaken off knocks which forced them out of the win over Stuttgart, while Toni is back after missing the first leg against Zenit through suspension.

Long-term injured midfielder Hamit Altintop is the only name missing, while both Mark van Bommel and Miroslav Klose will play with broken noses.

"It is always important when everybody is on board and we are at our strongest," said van Bommel, who - like Lahm and Lukas Podolski - is one yellow card away from a ban which would keep him out of the final.

"We are all completely convinced we can go through, not just now but before the season even started."

"This is the first (European) semifinal since a few years and so it is very important, we want to win four titles this year."

"This is a chance you get maybe one or two times in your career and we will all do what we can."

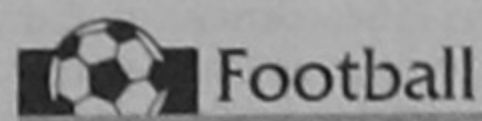
Having broken his nose in three places during the first leg, Klose says Bayern must go hard in Russia.

"The only way is to be fully committed and go full throttle," said Klose.

"We go there to win and are convinced that we will win it."

"The atmosphere in the team is good and everybody believes we can do it."

Ronaldo goes into hiding



AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Ronaldo was holed up in his apartment Wednesday following the AC Milan striker's night on the town in Rio playing away with a trio of transvestite prostitutes, one of whom he alleges tried to bribe him out of 30,000 dollars.

A gaggle of press had no luck as they sought to bag an interview with the world champion, who after giving his initial account to police insisted he had nothing further to say.

He is Monday due to go to the Rio police commissariat to make a full statement, as are the transvestites.

In the meantime the embarrassed "Phenomenon" is keeping his head down and has even requested that his physiotherapist come to his apartment in the wealthy Barra da Tijuca district to continue his recuperation following knee surgery in February and avoid having to attend his usual clinic.

He furthermore cancelled two

media engagements, according to his press secretary, who insisted he would not be going to the police commissariat.

The three-time world Footballer of the Year was out and about in Rio to watch his beloved club Flamengo at the Maracana stadium.

Afterwards, and having dropped his girlfriend off at her house, he picked up 'Andreia Albertine', real name Andre Luiz Ribeiro Albertino, a 21-year-old transvestite, who suggested bringing along two colleagues charging 300 dollars each.

After they booked into a nearby motel it dawned on Ronaldo, all-time top World Cup goalscorer that the trio were transvestites.

When the 2002 World Cup winner realised his mistake he reportedly threatened to hit Andreia, who accused him of asking her to buy him drugs, according to local press reports quoting the prostitute.

Andreia videoed the footballer emerging from the motel on her mobile phone's camera.

The video, which appeared later

on the internet site YouTube, shows Ronaldo wearing a Flamengo shirt. In the background a non-identified voice can be heard saying: "This is to prove that it's really you".

In a statement issued by his press office and carried late Tuesday on his official website Ronaldo swears to "never have taken drugs and to have been a victim of an extortion attempt".

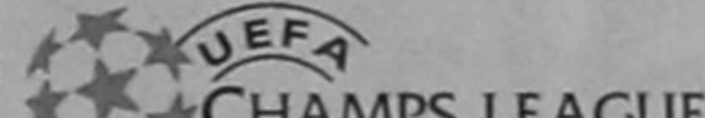
Ronaldo, according to Rio police superintendent Carlos Augusto Nogueira, "reported that Andreia had taken his car documents and demanded 30,000 dollars to avoid a scandal".

Nogueira added: "Ronaldo admits the facts. He said he just wanted to amuse himself, that's not a crime. To pay to have sexual relations isn't illegal."

"There's a strong chance that Ronaldo has been the victim of extortion."

According to Brazilian media Wednesday, police indicated another of the prostitutes and a witness have largely backed up Ronaldo's account.

Messi outshines C'Ron



REUTERS, Manchester

According to his peers in England, Manchester United forward Cristiano Ronaldo remains the Premier League's outstanding player but when it comes to the world stage he may still have to bow to Lionel Messi.

It is Ronaldo not Messi who will grace the final of the Champions League after the Portugal international, voted the Player of the Year by his fellow players for the second year running, helped United to overcome Barcelona in their semifinal.

No-one, though, could have

done more than Messi to try to influence the second leg at Old Trafford on Tuesday apart from Paul Scholes who scored the only goal of United's 1-0 victory.

The 20-year-old Messi, three years Ronaldo's junior, was the outstanding attacking player on show and almost single-handedly led Barcelona's attempt to claw back Scholes' early goal and take the 2006 winners through to Moscow with an away goal.

Though United defended well, they could hardly lay a finger on the bewitching winger who rode tackle after tackle to try to create the decisive opening.

One typically elusive run and shot in the first half had Edwin van der Sar at full stretch to save. Thereafter, the Argentina interna-

tional picked and probed at the United back line to create openings for teammates which they were unable to take.

Ronaldo's tally of 38 goals this season, including seven in the Champions League, represents an outstanding return and at times he has proved almost untouchable.

The effort of leading United's pursuit of a domestic and European double appears to be taking its toll, however, and while there is no questioning his commitment to the cause in close to 180 minutes since missing an early penalty in the Nou Camp last week he failed to hurt Barcelona.

What he does have, though, is another chance to state his case in Moscow on May 21, while Messi can only watch and wonder.

Fans will need visas



AFP, Moscow

The thousands of English fans travelling to Moscow for the Champions League final on May 21 will need an entry visa, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Wednesday, contradicting an earlier statement by the city's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov.

However, the foreign ministry stressed the Russian embassy in London would deal with all visa applications in good time.

Manchester United, who beat Barcelona on Tuesday, will face the winners of Wednesday's match between Chelsea and Liverpool in the first final between two English clubs in the 52-year history of the European Cup and Champions League.

"The exact conditions of the entry will be announced soon after both finalists will be determined," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

"Nevertheless, we can assure the fans who want to support their side in Moscow our embassy in Britain will examine all the visa bids from the supporters in proper time."

"We would also like to stress that our visa procedures are much easier than the demands of the British embassy for the Russian fans, who want to support their squads in Britain," the statement added.

"We take our obligations seriously and will do our best to provide the fans an opportunity to visit the Champions League final."

"We are sending more personnel to London to help our consulate solve this tough mission. We are ready to co-operate with the clubs and travel agencies."

Each club reaching the final will receive 23,500 tickets to distribute to their supporters but there had been fears the cumbersome visa application process for foreigners entering Russia could cause problems.

But Luzhkov, who had said fans "could attend the match without obtaining Russian entry visas" insisted he would do all he could to remove obstacles in the way of supporters travelling from England to Russia.

"We have resolved a great deal of problems ahead of the final and do not expect any more difficulties," he said. "I can promise that it will be a real football holiday on May 21 in Moscow."

UEFA spokesman William Gaillard said talks with the Russian authorities to ease the visa problem were making progress.

"The Russians have shown great flexibility and hopefully within the next 48 hours we will be announcing a more simplified procedure for visas to make it easier for fans to get to Moscow," he said.

"There are different possibilities but we are close to achieving what we want. We just have to make some choices, together with the

Russian authorities."

Gaillard also said that Russian police made tactical planning visits to witness English forces dealing with the Liverpool against Arsenal and United against Roma quarterfinals last month.

"It is not the first time there has been such a situation for the Champions League final - we had (Italy's) AC Milan v Juventus in Manchester and (Spain's) Real Madrid v Valencia in Paris," Gaillard added.

"The main issues for us are the airport capacities and air transport capacity because there will be more than 50,000 people coming from Britain and all by air."

The potential for air travel problems would be heightened if Liverpool also reach the final as both sets of fans would then be trying to get on charter flights from Manchester Airport.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson said although he does not really care who wins the other semifinal, he might have a slight preference for Liverpool if only to ensure more tickets for his club's fans.

Ferguson, who tasted European glory with the Red Devils in 1999, is aware the Russian roots of Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich may make tickets harder to come by if the Londoners make it through.

"Maybe we will get more tickets against Liverpool because Roman Abramovich seems to have bought them all up," he said. "It would be a nice final against Liverpool but I really don't care."

Nedved to wait till next week

AFP, Prague

Czech playmaker Pavel Nedved will wait until next week to reveal if he wishes to be in his country's Euro 2008 squad, his agent said Wednesday.

"You will find out next week. Give him the time and space to make his decision calmly," the Dnes newspaper quoted his agent Mino Raiola as saying.

Nedved, who has 91 caps and scored 18 goals for the Czechs, will turn 36 in August and said he had ended his international career after the 2006 World Cup, since when he had only appeared in a friendly with Serbia in August of that year.

"He is mulling over what he can still bring to the team and if he will still have enough in the tank at the end of the season," Raiola said of the 2003 Ballon d'Or winner.

But Czech fans are voicing more and more support for his return given the long injury absence of Arsenal star Tomas Rosicky, out of action since January.

"If Rosa (Rosicky) cannot go to the Euro for one reason or another then only Pavel Nedved can replace him," AC Milan's Czech defender Marek Jankulovski told Dnes.

Since making his Czech debut in 1994, Nedved has appeared in three major championships - Euro 96, when the Czechs made the final, as well as Euro 2004, when they fell to eventual winners Greece in the semis, and the 2006 World Cup.

The Czechs this year face co-hosts Switzerland, Portugal and Turkey.

Lucio rules out Barca move

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich's Brazilian defender Lucio on Wednesday ruled out any chance of a summer switch to Barcelona and says he is happy to stay in Bavaria.

"I have made my decision, I have no reason to leave here, I will stay with Bayern," he told German tabloid Bild on Wednesday.

Lucio, one of the best central defenders in the Bundesliga, is under contract with Bayern until 2010.

Last month, he implied he may join Barcelona at the end of the season in a deal worth up to 20 million euros to the German giants.

With 65 appearances for his country, the 29-year-old has spent most of his career in Germany having been at Bayer Leverkusen from 2000-04 when he left to join Bayern Munich.

He has 203 Bundesliga appearances and scored 21 league goals, winning two German league titles in 2005 and 2006, but is almost certain to win a third this season with Bayern 12 points clear at the top of the table.

Referee in hot water

AFP, Tokyo

One of Japan's top referees is in hot water with football authorities after allegedly telling a player to "drop dead" for complaining about a decision during a J-League match.

"We take it very seriously," Japan Football Association executive director Kozo Tajima said Wednesday in a statement about the previous day's incident.

"We will hold hearings with various people and consider what we should do," he said.

The association's disciplinary committee has already begun an inquiry into the case.

According to the Nikkan Sports daily, 36-year-old referee Yuichi Nishimura was infuriated when Oita Trinita defender Taikai Uemoto came up to him in the 82nd minute of the match at Tokyo's Ajinomoto Stadium.

Play was just about to resume after an FC Tokyo forward fouled another Oita defender.

Uemoto went up to the referee and demanded a caution for the Tokyo striker as it was his second foul of the game, the Sports daily reported.

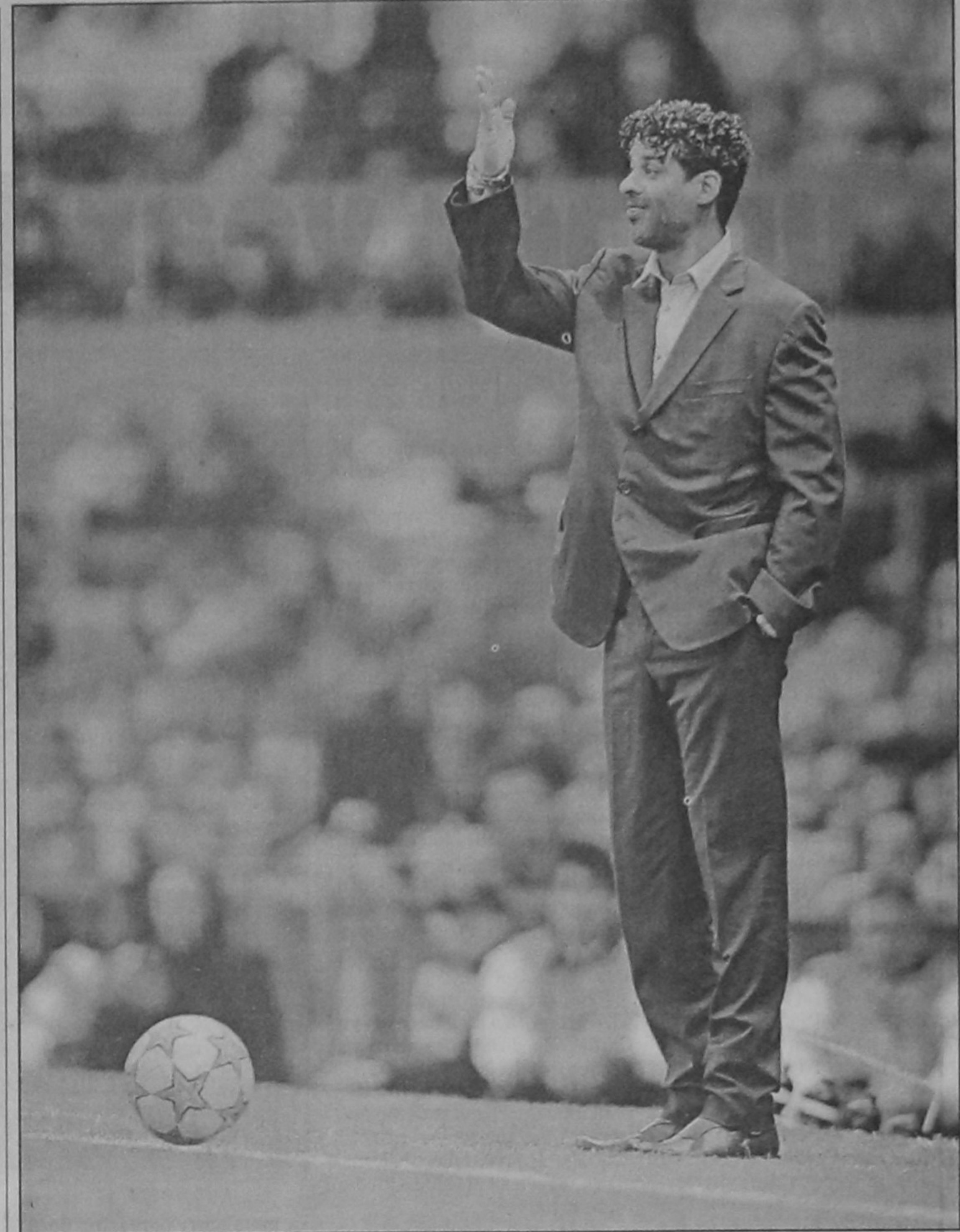
Nishimura shot back, "Shut up, just play with your mouth shut. Drop dead," according to the daily, which quoted players from both clubs.

"I was shocked," Uemoto, 25, told the paper.

"If one of us said the same thing as a player, we would have been sent off. That referee deserved a red card although the players don't have cards. He can never be tolerated."

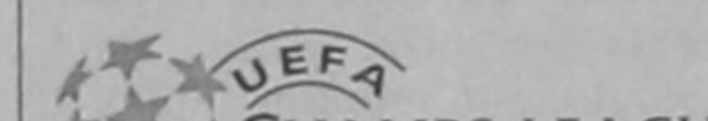
Oita eventually lost the match 1-0. Nishimura won his professional referee's licence in 2004 and has officiated at the Asian Cup and the under-17 World Cup last year.

At the youth event, he became the first Japanese to referee the final of a global tournament sponsored by the world's football governing body FIFA.



Barcelona manager Frank Rijkaard gives instructions to his players during their Champions League semifinal against Manchester United at Old Trafford on Tuesday. Rijkaard is under increasing pressure to quit after Barcelona were knocked out of the Champions League leaving him trophy less this season.

Rijkaard won't quit



AFP, Manchester

Frank Rijkaard insists that he has no plans to quit Barcelona but that did not stop him highlighting his credentials as a purveyor of the beautiful game to potential employers that include Chelsea's Roman Abramovich.

A Champions League semifinal defeat by Manchester United here on Tuesday has left Barca's coach facing the sack at the end of another trophy-less season but it is certain the amiable and articulate Dutchman will not be without work for long.

Avram Grant may have guided Chelsea to within sight of both the Premier League and Champions League trophies but even his closest friends would not claim that he has got close to delivering the fluid, attacking football that Abramovich craved sufficiently to ditch Jose Mourinho one month into the season.

Silverware may yet save Grant's skin but the odds on there being a vacancy at Stamford Bridge this summer remain short, and Rijkaard looks increasingly like the favourite to fill it.

In that context, it was notable that, in the wake of Tuesday's defeat, he opted to qualify his praise for English clubs' current domination

of the Champions League with an expression of regret that they do not play with more flair.

"The level of the English teams now is very high," Rijkaard acknowledged. "If it were not for the fact they had to play against each other, we could easily have seen four teams in the semis."

"They are very difficult to beat, very strong and very disciplined. In European games they all get behind the ball when they lose it, they are very well organised and play on the counter attack. It is really tough to beat English teams."

Despite that gracious acknowledgement of how the balance of power in European football has shifted, Rijkaard regrets that the entertainment value of England's domestic competitions is not matched by performances of the country's leading clubs in Europe.

"Results are very important of course, but I think they also have a lot more to give on the pitch to the public," he said.

"Their style is different in Europe and that is why it is successful. I think it started with the foreign coaches who have organised things very well and they have great players."

"But sometimes it is a pity because it is not the most beautiful way of football."

Sir Alex Ferguson, did not dispute Rijkaard's suggestion that United's tactics over the two legs of the semifinal had been cautious, admitting he had stressed to his

players the importance of denying Barca space in midfield.

The tactic worked well with the Catalans largely restricted to shots from outside the box in both legs of the tie.

"If you try and meet them too early they can open you up because they always have an extra man in midfield," Ferguson reflected. "I think what Frank means is that we did not go hell for leather, trying to defend too early. I think he would have liked that if we had."

Rijkaard's removal from the hot seat at the Nou Camp is now regarded as inevitable in Catalonia, but the Dutchman insisted he would not walk away from the club he guided to Champions League glory three years ago.

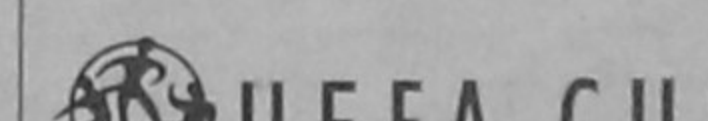
"That thought has not entered my head," he insisted. "I have no intention of leaving."

"It would be a different case if the players were saying it was time to go but that is not the case. Barcelona are a massive club and there are people to take the decisions at the end of the season if decisions need to be taken."

Rijkaard admitted his side's lack of a cutting edge had cost them the chance of a place in next month's final in Moscow.

"We did everything but score," he said. "It was a very even game, if anything we had the better of the play. But the rules are that the team that scores goes through and they did that."

Injury worry for Rangers



AFP, Florence

Rangers' last match on Italian soil saw them beat Livorno 3-2 in October 2006, and Cuellar feels they can repeat that success.

"My feelings are very positive," the 26-year-old told Spanish newspaper Marca.

"We were very focused throughout the whole match (the first leg) and Fiorentina didn't have too many chances to score at Ibrox."

"I think that we have a great opportunity to reach the final. We can win and get through in Italy."

Both Rangers and Fiorentina are going through difficult spells at the moment, with their domestic and European ambitions both in danger of blowing up in smoke.

Rangers had looked to be cruising to the Scottish Premier League title but two recent defeats to arch-rivals Celtic means they trail their city rivals by five points, although they have three games in hand.

Fiorentina are fourth in Serie A and chasing a spot in next season's Champions League but at the weekend they saw their lead over AC Milan cut to two points after they conceded an injury time equaliser to Sampdoria.

For either side this match could provide the spark to a successful season or the beginning of a series of disappointments.

Fiorentina captain Marco Donadel is confident his team can put their weekend set-back behind

them and focus on Thursday night.

"We're thinking only about Thursday. It's been difficult overcoming the disappointment of Sunday but it's past now," he said.

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