



Chelsea's German midfielder Michael Ballack (L) scores the opening goal from a header against Newcastle during their Premiership match at St James Park on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Guardiola replacing Rijkaard

REUTERS, Madrid

Former club captain Pep Guardiola will replace Frank Rijkaard as Barcelona coach at the end of the season, Spanish media reported on Tuesday.

Newspapers said that Barcelona's delegate commission, which includes club president Joan Laporta and sporting director Txiki Begiristain, had met on Monday and recommended replacing Rijkaard as first team coach.

Barcelona-based daily Sport said the decision would be ratified by the rest of the board and made official at the end of the season.

The club has said it will not comment on possible changes until the season is over.

Rijkaard, whose contract runs to 2009, has denied reports he will step down as coach in the wake of the team's failure to win any silverware over the past two seasons.

Local-born Guardiola made his name at Barcelona as a cultured midfielder in the early 1990s when Johan Cruyff was manager.

He quickly established himself as a favourite at the Nou Camp and became one of the key players in Cruyff's so-called "Dream team" which won four consecutive league titles between 1991 and 1994 and the European Cup in 1992.

He was part of the Spain side that won the gold medal in the Barcelona Olympics and won 47 caps for the senior national team.

Guardiola left Barcelona in 2001 to join Serie A side Brescia but his career in Italy was disrupted when he tested positive for nandrolone in November 2001.

He served a four-month ban but strenuously denied any offence and went through the courts to clear his name, finally winning his case in October last year.

After spells in Qatar and Mexico, Guardiola announced his retirement as a player in Nov. 2006. He was appointed coach of Barcelona's B side last June.

## 'Torres will be even better'

AFP, Liverpool

Fernando Torres has enjoyed one of the most prolific debut seasons in Premier League history, but Liverpool goalkeeper Jose Reina believes his Anfield teammate will be even better next season.

Torres has taken English football by storm following his 21 million pounds club record move from Atletico Madrid.

The Spaniard has scored 23 league goals to equal former Manchester United forward Ruud van Nistelrooy's record for a foreigner playing their first season in England's top division.

But Reina is convinced his compatriot's first year in England has been a learning process that will reap greater rewards next term. "You have to remember that this is Fernando's first season in England so he will improve and get even better," Reina said.

"He always wants to learn and he will improve because he's hungry. As a player you are always learning and always looking to get better and believe me that will be Fernando's goal next season."

"English football is different but he has adapted really well - better than anyone could have expected. You only need to look at the number of goals he has scored."

## Barca fight for 2nd place

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid are set to rub salt into the wounds of arch rivals by parading their 31st Spanish league trophy when they host Barcelona at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium on Wednesday.

Real fans waited until the early hours to celebrate with the players at Cibeles fountain on Sunday night after Real retained the title with a thrilling late 2-1 victory over Osasuna.

The celebrations could go into another dimension when Real are presented with the trophy in front of a full house at the Bernabeu - although football is likely to dominate with Barcelona in need of the points to wrest second place from Villarreal.

"It will be a great party against Barcelona that is for sure," said Real coach Bernd Schuster. "We deserve this title as we have been the best team this season and now we can enjoy it."

Despite the temptation to rub salt into Barca's wounds, Real president Ramon Calderon revealed his Barca counterpart Joan Laporta had congratulated him after the Osasuna game.

"His was the first call that I received, just before we touched down, at 1:20 in the morning. Joan Laporta congratulated me and I thought it was a really great ges-

ture," Calderon said.

After losing out to Real in the title race for the past two seasons Laporta and the Barca board have a decision to make on coach Frank Rijkaard who could be attending his final Clasico.

Barca thumped Valencia 6-0 in their last match and unlike Real they have something to play for as they bid to overtake Villarreal who are currently four points ahead in second.

"This was the best way to go to the Bernabeu - with high morale. There are three key points at stake and we'll go to win," said Argentine forward Lionel Messi.

As Barca set out to avenge their 1-0 loss to Real at the Nou Camp in December they will do so without the suspended Samuel Eto'o and Deco.

While Real-Barca is the obvious highlight of the midweek fixture programme there are several other games with high stakes.

Racing Santander host Sevilla in a duel to decide who will claim the

third Champions League spot.

Racing are a point ahead of Sevilla and neither side can afford to drop any points if they want to put pressure on fourth-placed Atletico Madrid.

"It is a key match against a direct rival because there isn't much between us in the Champions League race," said Sevilla defender Daniel Alves.

Atletico, two points ahead of Racing and three ahead of Sevilla, travel to Espanyol on Thursday knowing they just need to hold their nerve in the final three games.

Down at the bottom there is a real dogfight to stay in the league and Valencia, fourth last season, host Real Zaragoza on Wednesday in a surprise relegation six-pointer.

Valencia have shipped 60 goals in this season - only relegated Levante have conceded more - and lie two points above the drop.

Zaragoza are a point below Valencia but are on a high after a 1-0 win over Deportivo La Coruna last time out while Valencia were thrashed 6-0 by Barcelona.

Getafe have been tussling for trophies in the UEFA Cup and Kings Cup this season but now they are two points above the relegation zone going into Wednesday's match with Almeria.

After their devastating 2-1 loss against Real third from bottom Osasuna must pick themselves up for a tricky trip to Real Mallorca.

Recreativo Huelva are level on 40 points with Osasuna and have a difficult home match against in-form Villarreal on Wednesday.

### FIXTURES

**Wednesday**  
(all 1900 GMT unless stated)  
Real Betis v Valladolid, Getafe v Almeria, Recreativo Huelva v Villarreal, Deportivo La Coruna v Levante, Valencia v Real Zaragoza, Real Mallorca v Osasuna, Real Murcia v Athletic Bilbao, Racing Santander v Sevilla, Real Madrid v Barcelona (2100 GMT)  
**Thursday**  
Espanyol v Atletico Madrid (2000 GMT)

## Fans don't need visas



AFP, Paris

Fans travelling to Moscow for the Champions League final between Manchester United and Chelsea on May 21 will be able to use match tickets as entry visas, UEFA announced on Monday.

European football's ruling body made the announcement on their website after holding discussions with the Russian authorities. In recent days it was reported that tickets could not be used as travel visas.

UEFA underlined that fans will have to show a valid match ticket, a valid passport and a completed immigration form upon entry to

Russia.

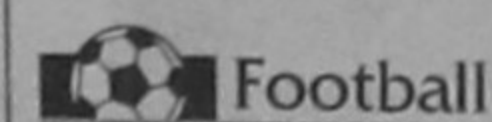
"... following high level discussions involving the UEFA President, Michel Platini, the Russian Government and UEFA are pleased to confirm that all supporters will be able to use their match ticket as a visa entry to the Russian Federation for a period of 72 hours," said the statement.

"The visa exemption applies to all ticket holders coming to Russia for the final in the period between 19 and 23 May 2008.

"Supporters will need to present a valid match ticket, a valid passport and a completed immigration form upon entrance to the Russian Federation."

UEFA added that supporters travelling to Russia without visas will be "asked to keep their ticket up to departure from Moscow".

## Hleb seeking way out



THE INDEPENDENT

Alexander Hleb remains hopeful that he will follow his teammate, and friend, Mathieu Flamini in leaving Arsenal this summer with the midfielder, according to sources, privately questioning the club's ambitions and spending power.

The Belarusian, who is wanted by Internazionale, has just turned 27 and, with two years left on his contract at the Emirates, is also believed to be concerned about Arsene Wenger's policy of only offering 12-month contracts to players aged 30 and over. Hleb has

also let it be known that the offer from Inter far exceeds his wages at Arsenal.

His apparent desire to leave is even more of an irritant to Wenger than Flamini's departure. Hleb's representatives have angered Arsenal by indicating that they may be willing to use Article 17 of the Fifa regulations which, in brief, would allow him to buy out the final years of his contract. Such a move is usually nothing more than a threat indeed it is one that William Gallas used to leave Chelsea for Arsenal but, in theory, Hleb could force the issue.

Hleb arrived at Arsenal for 11.2 million pounds from Stuttgart in July 2005 and such has been Wenger's annoyance at

Inter's public interest that he has threatened to report the Italian club to Fifa although such a complaint is unlikely to have any effect. Milan last night announced they had signed Flamini after the 24-year-old arrived in Italy on Sunday evening, following Arsenal's match against Everton, to have dinner with the club's vice-president Adriano Galliani.

The agent of the Lille midfielder Jean Makoun has claimed that Arsenal are considering signing the 24-year-old as Flamini's replacement. Makoun has impressed in the Champions League, particularly against Manchester United, and has also been linked with Tottenham.

## Nani asks for forgiveness

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United winger Nani has pleaded with his teammates to forgive him for his needless red card against West Ham.

Nani was sent off in the first half at Old Trafford on Saturday after headbutting West Ham defender Lucas Neill.

The Portuguese player faces a three-match ban, ruling him out of United's crucial final Premier League game against Wigan, and could also be hit with a fine by United.

Nani claimed he was provoked by Neill but admitted he should have been able to control himself.

"I recognise that my action was a thoughtless one, but I also have to say that I was provoked and attacked. I know it serves as no excuse, but that's exactly what happened," he said.

"I regret having done what I did and I have to be thankful for the fact that my teammates secured a win which was extremely important to us.

"I want to publicly ask for forgiveness, firstly of my teammates, who were forced into a greater effort during more than 60 minutes, secondly of my manager and coaches, and thirdly of the United fans who have given me so much affection."

Nani also apologised for leaving Old Trafford in a rage before the end of Saturday's game.

"Believe me, it was difficult. At that moment I only wanted to disappear. That was what I did. I also ask forgiveness of the fans and the club for that," he added.

## N Korea want to play South in Shanghai

AFP, Seoul

North Korea want to relocate next month's World Cup qualifier against South Korea away from Seoul, a South Korean football official said Tuesday.

The first inter-Korean qualifier was moved from the North's capital Pyongyang to Shanghai after the North refused to let South Korea play their national anthem and fly their flag at the match.

That game on March 26 ended in a goalless draw. The Koreans face each other again on June 22.

"There has been no official request but we heard that the North wants to hold the second match again in Shanghai," a Korea Football Association (KFA) official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

South Korean officials say they want to stick to the original venue.

"We have not budged from our stance that the next match be held in Seoul," KFA vice chief Cho Jung-Yeon told Yonhap news agency.

The association's chief Chung Mong-Joon has said he does not object to North Korea raising their national flag and playing their anthem in Seoul.

Fifa rules stipulate that teams taking part in World Cup events should be allowed to use their national anthems and flags.

The communist North and capitalist South have remained technically at war since the end of their 1950-1953 conflict. Relations have improved in recent years but have worsened since the conservative administration of President Lee Myung-Bak took office in February.

The two Koreas are linked with Turkmenistan and Jordan in their World Cup qualifying group.

## Blues keep up pressure

AFP, London



Chelsea ensured the English Premier League battle will continue to the final day of the season by beating Newcastle 2-0 at St James' Park on Monday.

A Michael Ballack header and a late strike from Florent Malouda secured a win that leaves Avram Grant's side level on points with Manchester United ahead of the final round of matches on Sunday.

United remain top courtesy of a vastly superior goal difference and that advantage means they will be champions if they win at Wigan, or at least match Chelsea's result in their final match, at home to Bolton.

But Grant was delighted that his players had pushed United to the wire, and warned the champions that they still have their work cut out if they are to secure the club's tenth title under Sir Alex Ferguson.

"Manchester United are a great team but we are giving them a

good, good battle and we want to continue to the last moment," the Israeli said.

"We have showed a lot of character to get here. The advantage is with United but it will not be easy. They need to win to be champions."

Chelsea were under pressure for long periods from Kevin Keegan's side, who had gone into the match unbeaten in their seven previous matches.

But John Terry's goal-line clearance from Michael Owen denied the Magpies a half-time lead and Chelsea made their hosts pay after the break.

Ballack glanced in a Didier Drogba freekick in the 60th minute and, with eight minutes to play, French winger Malouda rounded off a slick passing move by slotting a low left-foot shot past Steve Harper.

Terry admitted afterwards that Grant had been forced to give his players "a bit of a rollicking" at the interval following their sluggish start to the match.

"I've said all along, we need to

do our job and that is what we have done," Terry said.

The Chelsea captain expects Wigan, who are managed by former United defender Steve Bruce, to provide the leaders with a tough test next weekend.

"Wigan are on a great run at the moment. They came to Stamford Bridge and gave us a good game and they've won a few since then."

"Steve Bruce is a great manager and they will do the Premiership justice. They are safe now but they will be wanting to beat Manchester United."

Grant admitted his side's first-half display had looked tired.

"We were very slow, the movement was not good but we changed tactics and the second half was far better," he said.

Newcastle boss Kevin Keegan paid tribute to the grit and quality Chelsea had displayed to secure their win, but admitted he expects them to miss out on the title.

Keegan said: "Any other season, Chelsea would be worthy champions but I can't see Manchester United slipping up at Wigan."

## Football

AFP, Rome

Serie A top two Inter Milan and AS Roma are one step away from also contesting the Coppa Italia final.

Inter travel to Rome to face Lazio in their semifinal second leg on Wednesday with the scores finely poised at 0-0 from the first leg last month.

Roma have a slight advantage against Sicilians Catania, having won their first leg at home 1-0.

While silverware is obviously at stake, these cup semifinals are more of a distraction than a target for three of the four semifinalists.

Inter and Roma are still involved in the title battle following the champions' 2-1 defeat to AC Milan in their city derby on Sunday.

They lead Roma by three points with two matches remaining, although due to their superior head-to-head record Inter need only one win to ensure they claim a

third straight Scudetto crown.

Catania meanwhile are involved in the relegation dogfight and their 2-1 loss to fellow strugglers Reggina on Sunday drew them closer to the mire.

They now sit only one point above the drop zone.

That leaves only mid-table Lazio concentrating solely on this competition. They can still mathematically be relegated but it would take some unlikely results for that to become a reality.

Instead this competition provides them with a possible route into next season's UEFA Cup, something which would be a huge bonus from an otherwise troubled season.

It was clear, too, during Sunday's 2-1 home defeat to Palermo that the players' minds were firmly on Wednesday night.

"We've been guilty of inattention but our heads were already on Wednesday night," said Lazio coach Delio Rossi.

Some have suggested that his job depends on winning the Coppa Italia and qualifying for Europe, not some-

thing Rossi himself wants to spend too much time thinking about.

"My future at Lazio does not depend directly on the challenge of Inter on Wednesday night," he said.

"My team have had a very positive season. More positive than that of last season because right now I have all the cards in my hands."

"Lazio are growing as a group, they're very young players who've shown their worth and have understood how important this team is."

Lazio may have the most riding on this game but Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini claimed it is still a competition that he wants to win.

However, with his large squad at hand he is certain to ring the changes to concentrate on Sunday's home clash with Siena, where victory would secure the title.

### FIXTURES

(first leg scores in brackets):

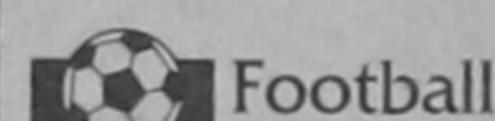
**Wednesday**

Lazio v Inter (0-0)

**Thursday**

Catania v Roma (0-1)

## L'pool close in on Barry



THE INDEPENDENT

Liverpool are winning the battle to sign Gareth Barry with the player himself having made the decision to sign for Rafael Benitez's club this summer rather than agree a new contract at Aston Villa. Benitez is also close to signing the Birmingham City goalkeeper Maik Taylor as a backup to Jose Reina.

The deal for the Aston Villa captain is set to prove the most complicated with the two clubs still at loggerheads over a fee, but Barry's wishes will, in all likelihood, force Villa into doing a deal eventually. The offer from Liverpool for Barry was valued at 10 million pounds although it was not an exclusively cash deal. In exchange for Barry, Liverpool were offering a choice of John Arne Riise, Jermaine

Pennant or Scott Carson, who is currently on loan to Villa, plus an unspecified cash deal to make the value up to 10 million pounds.

Barry has two years left of his contract at Villa and would become the side's highest earner should he accept the deal on offer to him. However, he has decided after 11 years at Villa that a move to Anfield would be in his best interests even though he is likely to be asked by Benitez to fulfil a role on the left side of midfield and defence rather than in the centre where he has established himself for England.

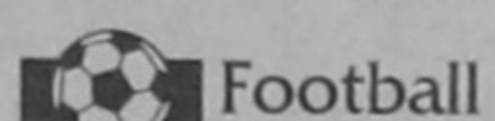
O'Neill dismissed the offer for Barry, which was faxed by Liverpool chief executive Rick Parry on Friday, as a "mish-mash of player exchanges concerning unnamed players". Unfortunately from Villa's perspective, the Liverpool player they would really like, Peter Crouch, who is out of contract next summer, was not

among the players eventually offered to them in part-exchange.

Crouch's future is still uncertain after he was left out of the Liverpool squad to face Manchester City on Sunday even though the England striker was fit. It now appears that Crouch, Pennant, Riise - a target for Newcastle and possibly Yossi Benayoun will all be allowed to leave in the summer. As well as signing the Borussia Dortmund full-back Philip Degen on a free transfer, Benitez will also move for Taylor.

Taylor, 36, is playing for a Birmingham team that is in the bottom three of the Premier League as they approach the last game of the season. He has been at Birmingham since 2003 where he originally went on loan from Fulham before signing. He lost his place in last season's team that came up from the Championship but won it back this season and has been a regular since.

## Milan snap up Flamini



AFP, Rome

AC Milan have signed Arsenal midfielder Mathieu Flamini on a four-year deal after capturing the Frenchman on a free transfer, the Italian giants announced Monday.

The 24-year-old turned down a new deal offered by Gunners manager Arsene Wenger prior to his contract running out at the end of the current season, meaning he heads to the reigning European champions for free.

Flamini arrived in Milan on Sunday and sailed through a medical Monday before putting pen to paper.

The former Marseille player came notably to Milan's notice when he played a major role in their elimination by Arsenal at the last 16 stage of this season's Champions League.

The Frenchman, who has only one international cap to his name from a friendly against Morocco, had this season come to be nicknamed "Gattuso" by his Arsenal teammates.

Ironically, the real Gattuso - industrious midfielder Gennaro - is one of Milan's key players.

Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani attempted to reassure fans however, saying: "Flamini is not here to replace Gattuso. He can play in any position in midfield."

Gattuso meanwhile placed a question mark over his Serie A future by saying last week he would love to play in the English Premier League.

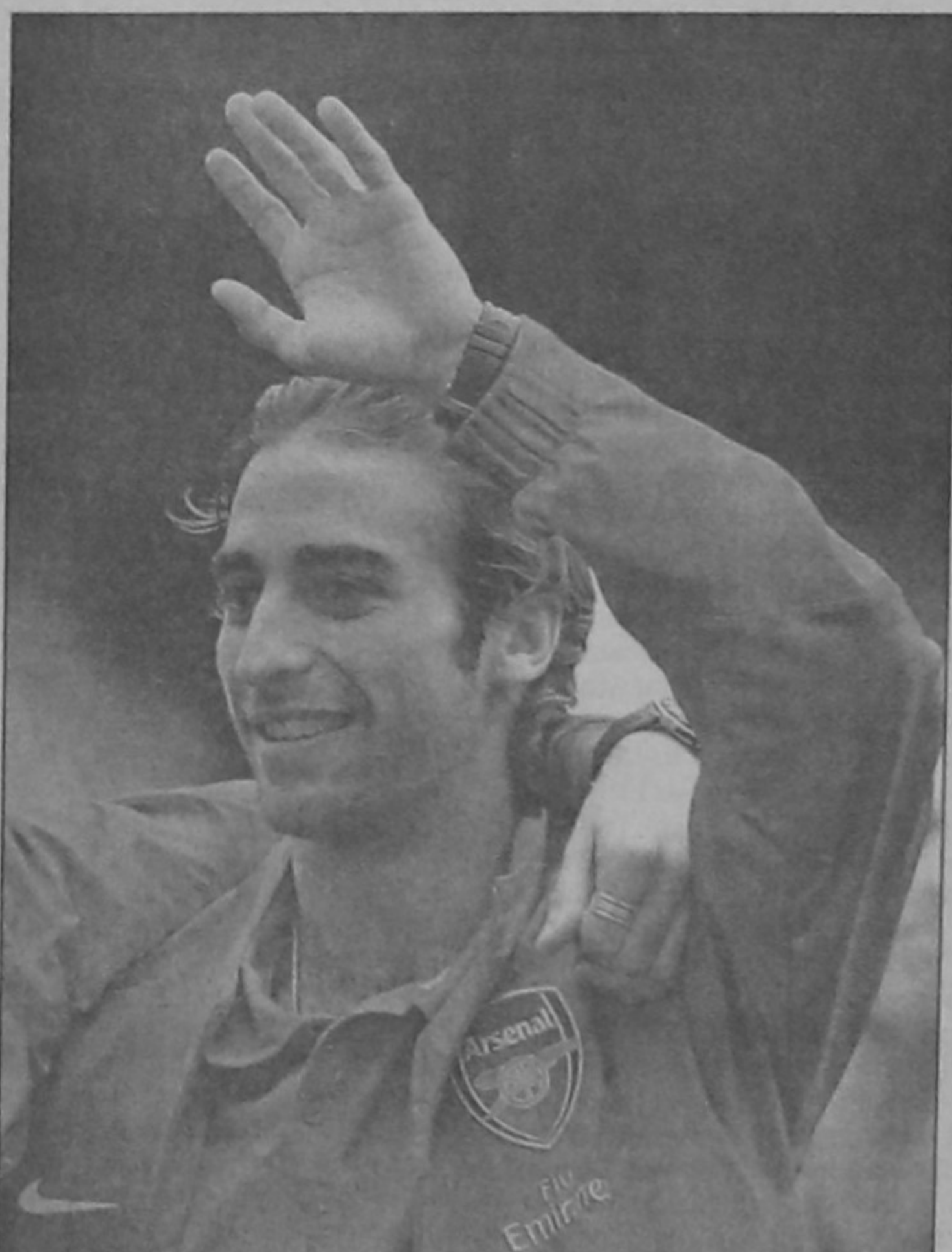


PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal's French midfielder Mathieu Flamini waves goodbye to the fans after their Premiership tie against Everton at the Emirates Stadium on Sunday.