

Totti blasts critics

AFP, Rome
Roma captain Francesco Totti has hit back at claims that he is finished as a player.

Ahead of this weekend's Rome derby, the 32-year-old, who has had a troubled return since knee surgery in April, has insisted that he was not "rushed back to action."

"I've heard strange voices, about my compromised career, bad surgery, a rushed recovery," he wrote in Corriere dello Sport.

"During my recuperation I underwent physical and medical tests and everyone gave me the green light to move to the next stage of my rehabilitation."

Totti is slowly returning to peak fitness. He played an hour in the Champions League win over Chelsea and 85 minutes against Bologna, in which he scored Roma's goal, his second of the season.

He continued, "It is clear that my athletic condition isn't going to be at its best. But I am sure that I will soon return to the best of my abilities."

It is vitally important that Roma win the Rome derby, as aside from local bragging rights, Luciano Spalletti's team hang just one point over the relegation zone.

Whilst they looked good in the 3-1 victory over Chelsea, the familiar defensive problems returned in the 1-1 draw with Bologna and Totti realises that with Lazio in confident mood his team will need to be at its best.

"Lazio are enjoying a good period, cause problems for all teams, are quick, aggressive, play with speed even in tight spaces, as they have demonstrated with their start to the championship."

Beckham has no time for Salma Hayek

INTERNET, undated

Salma Hayek is still owed a soccer lesson by David Beckham.

The 'Frida' actress paid 175,000 pounds (\$A407,000) for a one-hour private lesson with the football star at a New York charity auction hosted by Madonna in February outbidding formidable American Vogue editor Anna Wintour in the process - but has yet to claim her prize.

The pair have reportedly had difficulty securing a date for the coaching session due to David's sporting commitments and Salma's acting obligations.

A spokesman for Beckham said: "As yet, we haven't been able to sort out a date that suits all parties."

However, it seems unlikely the lesson will take place in the near future.

Beckham, who currently plays for Los Angeles Galaxy, is to move to Italy early next year, following his decision to sign a short-term contract with AC Milan.

Huntelaar out for six weeks

AFP, The Hague

Ajax's Dutch international striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar will be out for at least six weeks after tearing ankle ligaments in Sunday's win over Sparta Rotterdam, the club said Monday.

Huntelaar, 25, had a scan on the injury after the game and his loss will be a major blow to Ajax as he was last season's league top scorer with 33 goals and had hit another six this term.

He is also a key figure in the Dutch attack with Ruud van Nistelrooy having retired from the international scene.

More drugs tests in England

AFP, London

A group of 30 top players will face random drugs tests five times a year under a plan to tighten English football's controls on the use of performance-enhancing and recreational drugs, it emerged on Tuesday.

UK Sport, the body responsible for doping control in the United Kingdom, is planning to create a register of 30 players who will have to be available for testing every day of the year.

Andy Parkinson, UK Sport's head of operations for a drug-free sport, told The Sun newspaper that the aim was to protect the image of the game by bringing football's controls into line with the more stringent regimes in place in athletics and cycling.

"The last thing we want is for football to be in that position where it doesn't focus enough - doesn't put controls in place - and suddenly finds itself a sport with a fantastic profile in a crisis," he said.

Parkinson said UK Sport would be finalising the first list of players to be tested in consultation with the Football Association with a view to introducing the new regime from July, 2009.

Spurs plot Reds' scalp

Football

AFP, London

Harry Redknapp, whose magic touch since taking over at Tottenham has seen him dubbed the Harry Potter of English football, will be hoping to cast another spell on Liverpool when the Reds visit for a League Cup tie on Wednesday.

Redknapp's wizardry has worked wonders since he quit Portsmouth for north London with Spurs winning four and drawing one of his five matches in charge to haul themselves off the bottom of the Premier League table and out of the relegation zone.

Now, with the first phase of his mission at White Hart Lane accomplished, Redknapp must turn his attention to Tottenham's defence of a trophy they lifted last season in the euphoric early days of his predecessor, Juande Ramos's regime.

A dramatic 2-1 win over Liverpool at the start of the month began Spurs' current three-match winning run and they are likely to face a shadow of that Reds side this time around.

Rafael Benitez is likely to ring the changes but Redknapp understands what another win over Liverpool and progression in the competition can do for his reinvigorated team.

The new manager has already got Tottenham's first-team regulars buzzing and he is likely to use Wednesday's match as an opportunity to give a number of fringe players the opportunity to impress.

The new manager is keen to strengthen his squad but insists he will not be overly concerned if chairman Daniel Levy tells him there are no funds for January transfer window purchases.

"If there is no money, there is no money. The chairman at Portsmouth used to ask me if I needed anything and I would say no."

"I don't want to spend his (Levy's) money. If the chairman says there is a certain amount to spend, then that is different."

"But if there is no money, then I am just as happy to find a couple of loans and free transfers if I have to bolster the squad."

Liverpool travel to north London as the Premier League's second-placed team but are likely to be underdogs, with Benitez set to rest a significant number of the players that have been instrumental in the fine start to the league campaign.

While Fernando Torres may be given the opportunity to build his match fitness following a recent hamstring injury, Benitez is likely to take the likes of Steven Gerrard, Alvaro Arbeloa, Fabio Aurelio, Dirk

Kuyt and Robbie Keane out of the firing line.

And that could mean that Lucas Leiva, Philipp Degen, Emiliano Insua, Nabil El Zhar, Damien Plessis, Jermaine Pennant and David Ngog are all given the chance to impress at White Hart Lane, with the Brazilian goalkeeper Diego Cavalieri also set for a run-out.

With a league trip to Bolton on Saturday in the back of his mind, Benitez will be hoping to reach the next round with the minimum of disruption to the side that he has in mind for the Reebok Stadium.

Although all the attention has been on Benitez's side's flying start in the league, Lucas says the players are keen to bring home every trophy they can.

"The League Cup is an opportunity for us to show what we can do," he said. "It's an opportunity not just for me but for all the players and the club."

"It is not as important as the Premier League, but when you play for a club like Liverpool you want to win all the trophies. I have never played at Wembley and hopefully I will get the opportunity."

"I know it's a very famous stadium. Some of the Brazil internationals are played there but I have never had the opportunity to play in one of them, so hopefully I can play in the final."

Cole hangs up boots

Football

INTERNET, undated

Former England striker Andrew Cole will retire from playing football and is eyeing a coaching career, according to news reports on Tuesday.

The 37-year-old left Nottingham Forest 11 days ago, furious at what he saw as a lack of opportunities to fulfil his dream of ending his career in a blaze of glory by inspiring his hometown club to promotion.

As it is, Forest are second bottom of the Championship, and Cole made just five league starts this season.

"It's not the ideal ending," Cole told The Times. "It just wasn't working out."

"I told them from the outset that I didn't want to go there to sit on the bench because I didn't want to be perceived as sitting back and making easy money."

"I wanted to go there and offer something, but it was a strange one from the start. I never knew what

my role was.

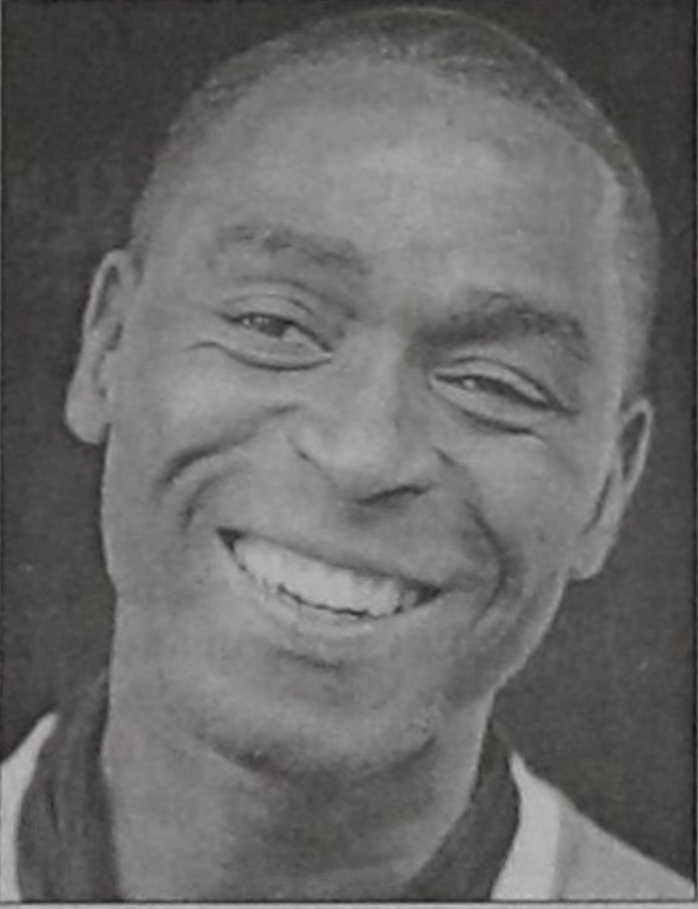
"Was it to lend a hand, use my League. He hit 55 goals in 69 league games for Newcastle, before making a 7 million pounds (10.93 million dollars) switch to Manchester United in December 1995.

There he scored 93 goals in 161 league appearances, culminating in the glorious treble winning season of 1999.

After five Premier League winner's medals, two FA Cups and a Champions League, Cole left United for Blackburn in December 2001, a decision he now calls "the biggest mistake I ever made."

He went on to Fulham, Manchester City, Portsmouth and Sunderland, totalling 187 goals, before dropping a level to join Burnley. Only Alan Shearer has scored more in the Premier League.

The 15-times capped Cole now hopes to move into coaching. "I have all this experience," he said. "I don't want to keep it to myself. I want to give something back. I don't think it's the end of the Andrew Cole story. Hopefully it's a new chapter."



ANDREW COLE

Changes adrift at Bayern?

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich's Bundesliga title chances are growing in the same way as the uncertainty about the future of captain Mark van Bommel at the club.

The Bild daily reiterated on Tuesday that van Bommel could be leaving when his contract expires after the season.

Talks between the Dutch midfielder and the club are set for December, but Kicker sports magazine also suggested this week that "the tendency at the club is towards departure."

Van Bommel's agent Rob Jansen was quoted by Kicker as saying: "We are waiting for Bayern, for their plans. If they don't want Mark anymore then he will leave. That's football."

Bild has linked van Bommel with Schalke 04 on several occasions and said that he is in constant contact with Schalke coach Fred Ruten. Their paths crossed a few years ago at PSV Eindhoven when van Bommel played there and Ruten

was assistant coach. Ruten did not want to comment, saying only "I know him very well." Van Bommel referred to the upcoming talks with Munich.

Both were seen talking briefly on Sunday when Munich won 2-1 at Schalke.

Van Bommel came to Munich in 2006 from Barcelona and was appointed team captain by new coach Juergen Klinsmann in the summer.

However, Klinsmann benched him for several games over poor form, but van Bommel is now a regular starter again. He is also controversial, though, for his temper which has earned him several red cards.

Van Bommel's fate could depend on whether Munich can sign Ukraine midfielder Anatoliy Tymoshchuk from UEFA Cup holders Zenit St Petersburg. Munich already wanted the 29-year-old in summer, but it is not fully clear whether he is ready to go to Munich.

The Russian season ends in a few weeks and the transfer fee for Tymoshchuk has been estimated at 15 million euros (19.3 million dollars).

Van Bommel may not be the only man out of Munich in the near future. Kicker said that Munich's board has now agreed to let frustrated Germany forward Lukas Podolski go during the winter break if he can find a club ready to pay a substantial fee. Podolski has been linked with his former club Cologne.

Tenager Toni Kroos may also depart to get more playing time elsewhere after being mostly overlooked by Klinsmann.

Kroos, 18, was fielded more frequently under former coach Ottmar Hitzfeld, who in a newspaper interview on Tuesday named van Bommel "a leader" and said that he wouldn't tell Podolski to move away from Munich.

The Switzerland coach Hitzfeld told the Munich daily that he was convinced that Bayern will defend the Bundesliga title now that they have overcome a sloppy start to the season with five straight wins for second place, one point behind Bayer Leverkusen and surprise team Hoffenheim.

"Bayern will certainly be top in the end," Hitzfeld said. "It affects the other teams when Bayern win. They know that Bayern are coming back."

"With all respect ... Hoffenheim are no rival for Munich. They don't have enough depth."

Elano slates Hughes

Football

INTERNET, undated

Manchester City midfielder Elano has criticised manager Mark Hughes for his lack of playing time and said there is no feedback off the pitch from the former Wales boss.

The Brazil star, who joined over a year ago from Shakhtar Donetsk, believes his options have diminished since Hughes took over from Sven-Goran Eriksson in the summer.

"When I am playing I know what he wants; when I come off there is nothing from him," Elano told Sky.

"It's his right - he is the manager. I respect him and I will keep working, arriving on time and doing my duties at the club, but my sadness is

at not playing. "I can't hide that from the fans or the president, who wants to make this a big club. I think I have the capabilities to be playing."

City, now backed by the billions of the Abu Dhabi United Group, have Elano's Brazil team-mate Robinho, former favourite Shaun Wright-Phillips and highly-rated Stephen Ireland in their ranks - all flair players operating from midfield positions.

However the need to start so many attackers seems to have taken its toll, with the club only 13th in the Premier League table despite the investment having won half the number of points they had in the bank at the same stage last season.

Elano, regarded as a superstar during his first season at Eastlands, was upbeat about the future of the club during these financially uncertain times, but less so about his own prospects.

"City have a big project. They have something which not many clubs have at the moment: money," he said.

"I want to help by playing. I respect everyone here. I have many friends here and get on with the team 100 per cent."

"I respect the manager a lot - but I cannot be happy if I don't play."

Elano has started eight of the club's 12 league matches this season.

City have backed Hughes after speculation that he was set for the sack, but fresh reports on Tuesday indicate that the owners may be set to offer former Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho, now installed at Internazionale in Italy, £15 million to take over.

Maradona gives Mascherano captaincy

AFP, Buenos Aires

Newly-appointed Argentina coach Diego Maradona said Monday he had lined up Liverpool's midfielder destroyer Javier Mascherano for the captaincy.

"I convinced him. While I am in charge I need him as captain," Maradona told La Red radio.

"He can transmit much of what he does in the centre of the pitch - we're not asking him to be a leader immediately," Maradona said as he prepares for his coaching debut at the helm of the albiceleste away to Scotland in a November 19 friendly in Glasgow.

Current skipper Inter Milan's Javier Zanetti.

Maradona last week toured several European countries to check on the form of a raft of top names including Mascherano and Barcelona's Leo Messi.

With their next World Cup qualifier, at home to Venezuela, not until March 28, Maradona is hoping his surprise new broom will lift a side currently third in the 10-team South American qualifying group.

Four teams qualify for the finals in South Africa but their form has been patchy with just one victory from their last seven matches -- when they beat Uruguay 2-1 on October 11.

They then lost to Chile for the first time in 35 years, prompting Alfio Basile to step down.

Maradona explained that he wanted to galvanise the side - "but you can't change history from one day to the next."

Looking back at his whistle-stop visit to Europe Maradona singled out Messi, Manchester United's Carlos Tevez and Mascherano, saying he had found them "motivated to the hilt."

Real eyeing Arshavin

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid, suffering a shortage of strikers, want to sign Russian Andrei Arshavin from Zenit St Petersburg in January on a six-month loan, a Spanish sports newspaper said Tuesday.

The Spanish champions, currently fourth in the Primera Liga, would then negotiate the purchase of the striker with Zenit, based on his performance during those six months, the AS daily said.

It said the Russian and UEFA Cup champions are seeking 30 million euros for their 27-year-old star.

But Real would be unable to play Arshavin in the Champions League as he has already turned out for Zenit in the competition this season, AS said.

The club is on the lookout for new strikers after Brazil's Robinho left for Manchester City in September and Dutchman Ruud van Nistelrooy suffered a knee injury which could see him out of action for several weeks.

Manchester United's Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo was linked with the Real for several months, but the English champions refused to sell.

Real is currently two points behind league leaders Barcelona, with its attack relying largely on the good form of Argentine Gonzalo Higuain.

They are to face third division Real Union at home in the second leg of the last 32 of the Spanish Cup Tuesday, after losing the first leg 3-2.

In the Champions League, Real has suffered two defeats against Juventus, and must beat Zenit next month to be sure of qualifying for the last eight.

Nistelrooy in US for treatment

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy has left for the United States to receive treatment for a knee injury from the same specialist who operated on him eight years ago, the club said Tuesday.

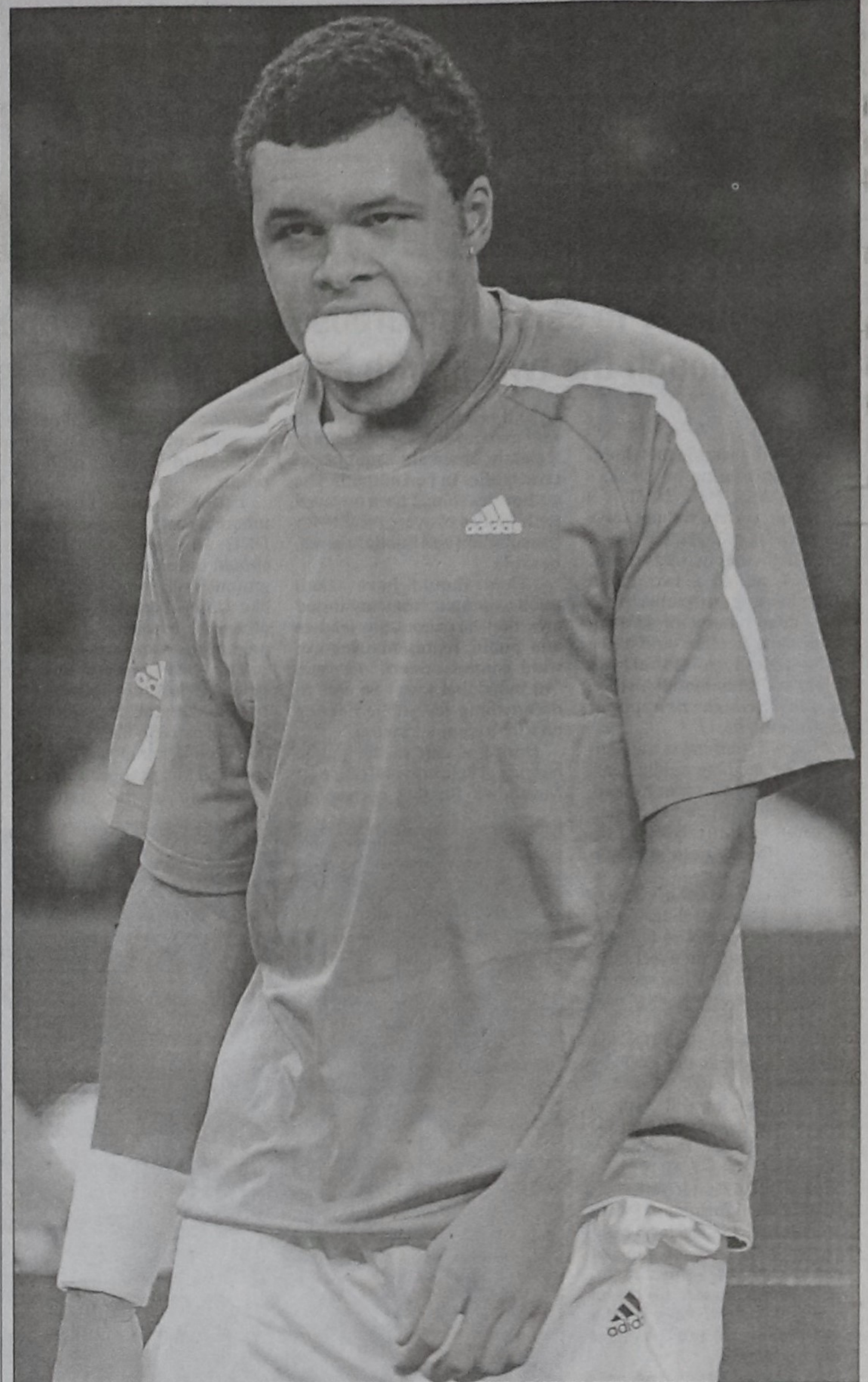
Ruud van Nistelrooy and a member of the club's medical staff left for the United States today, where they will see Dr. (Richard) Steadman, who operated on the striker's right knee in 2000," it said in a statement.

"Following a medical examination and MRI last Friday, Real Madrid's medical staff determined that the player has possibly injured the meniscus in his right knee."

The sports daily Marca said he may undergo surgery from Wednesday.

"Neither the player nor Real Madrid want to lose more time and the aim is that Van Nistelrooy is back in Madrid at the end of next week to recuperate," Marca said.

His absence is a hard blow for the Spanish champions, who are currently fourth in the Primera Liga and who have suffered two defeats to Juventus in the Champions League.



DEFEAT TASTES BITTER: Jo-Wilfried Tsonga of France sticks a ball in his mouth in frustration after his loss to Juan Martin del Potro of Argentina during the Shanghai Masters on Tuesday.

Del Potro upsets Tsonga

Tennis

AFP, Shanghai

Juan Martin del Potro won a tense encounter with French livewire Jo-Wilfried Tsonga 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/5) to breathe life into his Masters Cup campaign on Tuesday.

The 20-year-old Argentine showed steely determination as he won two gripping tie-breaks to revitalise his semifinal hopes and leave Tsonga's hanging by a thread.

Del Potro lost to world number three Novak Djokovic in his opening Gold Group match, while Tsonga was beaten by Russia's Nikolay Davydenko.

Muhammad Ali look-alike Tsonga thundered 12 aces in the first set but paid for 21 unforced errors as he went down 7-4 in the tie-break.

The match looked up for the athletic Frenchman when he was broken early in the second but he hit back immediately as del Potro netted.

Two points from defeat at 4-5, the pumped-up Tsonga recovered

spectacularly with a double jump-serve overhead and swatted forehand volley to stay in the match.

Del Potro took control of the second-set tie-break with a glorious backhand pass, and Tsonga saved two match points with his 17th ace and a service winner before he netted on the third.

Both players are making their Masters Cup debuts after breaking into the top 10 this year.

Tsonga reached the Australian Open final in January and was the surprise winner at this month's Paris Masters after a long spell out for knee surgery.

The six-foot-six (1.93 metre) del Potro shot to stardom when he reeled off his first four ATP titles in consecutive weeks in July and August.

The Argentine has also been selected for this month's Davis Cup final against Spain, who are missing injured world number one Rafael Nadal.

The elite, 4.45-million-dollar Masters Cup features an eight-man field who each play three group matches before the semifinals.

Cruz leaving in January

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan striker Julio Cruz is expected to leave the club in the January transfer window according to Tuesday's La Gazzetta dello Sport.

The Argentine's contract finishes in June 2010 and at 34 years of age coach Jose Mourinho believes his best is behind him and worth selling when the San Siro outfit can command a fee.

Furthermore the pair had a very public row during the 0-0 draw with Genoa, when Mourinho accused Cruz of not following his instructions.

Barcelona and Roma are the two clubs reported to be most interested in the player who scored a last-minute winner against Udinese at the weekend, his third of the season.

Since joining Inter in 2003 Cruz has scored 75 goals in 181 matches in all competitions. In 2007-2008 he took advantage of Zlatan Ibrahimovic's absence through injury to lead the attack, scoring 19 times.

GERMANY V ENGLAND More than a game

Football

INTERNET, undated

Germany coach Joachim Loew will have some clear words to say to the squad he names Thursday for next week's classic encounter with old rivals England. Loew is to use the opportunity of the friendly international in Berlin to lay down some rules and guidelines on how he expects his players to behave for the rest of the qualification campaign for the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa.

It follows remarks in public by captain Michael Ballack and midfielder partner Torsten Frings which were seen as critical of the coach and threatened to upset the harmony in the Germany squad.

All players - even those who may be sidelined with injuries - will be summoned, in consultation with the players' respective clubs, to hear Loew address what he now expects from his squad.

"It is important to me to speak about this issue and to put forward certain things on the road to the 2010 World Cup," he told Kicker

sports magazine. Ballack could well be one of those injured players, with the 32-year-old Chelsea player still sidelined after undergoing surgery to remove thickened nerve tissue on both feet last month.

Ballack now only has a chance of featuring if he plays for Chelsea in Wednesday's Carling Cup match against Burnley or Saturday's Premier League encounter at West Bromwich Albion.

Loew had earlier this month summoned Ballack for talks in Germany following the player's critical comments in a newspaper interview, which left the coach disappointed and dismayed.

It was not the first time this season that Loew has had to deal with off-field issues, following a dispute involving Ballack and team manager Oliver Bierhoff which had been simmering for some time.

Last week he then met Frings in Berlin after the 31-year-old Werder Bremen midfielder had publicly complained at being left out of the last two World Cup qualifiers.

Ballack had bemoaned the fact that senior players were not being shown enough respect following the

decision to leave stalwart Frings out of the side for the last two World Cup qualifiers.

Both Frings and Ballack were forced to apologize for airing their feelings in public.

Loew has also been distracted by Kevin Kuranyi's decision to walk out during last month's World Cup qualifier against Russia, a match he was watching in Dortmund as a non-playing squad member. The Schalke striker has now been banished by Loew.

Injuries to several first-choice players will give Loew the opportunity of introducing one or two fresh faces against England at the Olympic Stadium, a match he had in any case wanted to use to test some players.

Wolfsburg's uncapped Marcel Schafer is one newcomer who could be called up in place of the injured left-back Philipp Lahm. Leverkusen striker Stefan Kiessling should also get the nod when that Kuranyi is no longer in the frame.

Bayern Munich's Tim Borowski has also done well enough recently to join the intensive competition in midfield, giving Loew another alternative to Frings.