

PHOTO: AFP
Burnley forward Martin Paterson (R) shoots past Arsenal midfielder Kieran Gibbs during their Carling Cup quarterfinal at Turf Moor in Burnley on Tuesday.

Scholes ready for action

AFP, Manchester
Sir Alex Ferguson has confirmed that Paul Scholes is ready to return to action for Manchester United, two months after suffering knee ligament damage that required corrective surgery.

Ferguson told United Review that Scholes would probably feature in Wednesday's League Cup clash with Blackburn at Old Trafford.

"He is on the verge of playing again following his operation," the United manager said. "He is training well and chomping at the bit to get started."

"A place on the bench with perhaps a few minutes' pitch time could be good for him. We will see how things go."

Barring any setbacks, a cameo role on Wednesday could clear Scholes to start in Saturday's Premier League meeting with Sunderland, also at Old Trafford.

Mourinho wanted an Inter winner

INTERNET, undated
Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho said Tuesday he would rather one of his own players had won the Ballon d'Or which went to Manchester United forward Cristiano Ronaldo. "I'd have preferred that one of our players had won it," the Portuguese coach said when asked about the award going to fellow countryman Ronaldo.

Mourinho said Inter's Swedish star Zlatan Ibrahimovic was a player who would have deserved the trophy awarded by French magazine France Football.

Meanwhile Inter player and compatriot Figo said he was "proud for the Golden Ball (going) to Cristiano Ronaldo, who is the third player in the history of Portuguese football to win this prestigious prize, after Eusebio in 1965 and mine in 2000."

Troubled Spanish giants Valencia are considering selling off their most important stars - in order to reduce their massive debts.

Sports daily Marca said on Wednesday that Premier League clubs Chelsea and Manchester City are interested in Euro 2008 top scorer David Villa, and that Barcelona are renewing their interest in David Silva, another member of the Euro-winning Spain team.

Other Valencia stars rumoured to be the targets for other clubs, are Spanish internationals Joaquin, Fernando Morientes, Vicente Rodriguez and Raul Albiol, plus Portuguese players Miguel, Manuel Fernandes

Burnley upstage Gunners

AFP, London
Arsenal's young stars were upstaged by Burnley's own talented rookie as Kevin McDonald gave the Championship club a shock 2-0 win in the League Cup quarterfinals on Tuesday.

Gunnies manager Arsene Wenger kept faith with the precocious teenagers who routed Wigan in the previous round.

But his side, who had an average age of 19, came unstuck in freezing conditions at Turf Moor and failed to reach at least the semifinals for the first time in four years.

They were dumped out by McDonald, a 20-year-old Scottish midfielder signed from Dundee in pre-season.

McDonald struck early in the first half and added his second after the interval as Owen Coyle's team followed

Los Che might sell off stars

INTERNET, undated
Valencia are rumoured to be more than 150 million euros (253 million dollars) in debt, and could be soon filing for bankruptcy.

Valencia have been plagued by financial problems since the 1980s.

The construction of their new stadium, which will be used from next season onwards, will allegedly cost more than 200 million euros.

On Tuesday evening club president Vicente Soriano denied that he was considering resignation, and in an official statement claimed that "a plan of economic viability is perfectly defined and has been put into execution for months now."

The statement denies that the club is "in bankruptcy" and asks for "responsibility and rigour", as well as the "union of everyone in order

their wins over Chelsea and Fulham earlier in the competition with another famous scalp to reach the last four.

Wenger conceded that his kids still have a lot to learn and said: "We had six one on ones and didn't score and we were a bit fragile at the back."

"We had plenty of chances and if you don't score you have to question if you will go through."

"The young players have to learn that football is about efficiency from the first minute to the last. If you don't have that you pay for it. They have a lot to learn but the potential is there."

Burnley can look forward to their first semifinal for 25 years and boss Coyle believes his own youngsters deserve credit for the way they stood up to Arsenal.

"A lot was made of Arsenal's youngsters but I've got five or six kids in my team as well and we have shown we can play a bit as well," he said.

"You could see the quality Arsenal have and if you switch off you get punished. Our keeper made some great saves but to reach the semifinals is a magnificent achievement for everyone at the football club."

Meanwhile, Derby reached their first major semifinal since 1968 after Nathan Ellington's stoppage time penalty secured a dramatic 1-0 win over Premier League club Stoke.

Paul Jewell's side were heading for extra-time at the Britannia Stadium after Richard Cresswell had a goal disallowed and Miles Addison hit a post.

But Ellington converted from the spot after referee Rob Styles ruled that Andy Griffin had handled a cross in the penalty area.

On Wednesday, the other two quarterfinal ties see Manchester United host Blackburn and Tottenham travel to Championship team Watford.

Abramovich pays Hiddink

AFP, Moscow

Roman Abramovich has dipped into his own pocket to the tune of five million dollars to pay national coach Guus Hiddink's salary, Interfax news agency reported Wednesday.

"Roman (Abramovich) decided to give Russian Football Union five million dollars for Hiddink's salary," Sergei Kapkov, head of the "National Football Academy" foundation, said.

"The decision came after Abramovich discovered that the Dutch manager and other national side's coaches were receiving their fee with serious delays in the past three months."

Tenerife deny taking bribes

AFP, Madrid

Players at Spanish second division side Tenerife on Tuesday denied allegations they had accepted bribes to lose a key match last season.

"This accusation is totally false. We had nothing to do with this affair," the team said in a statement read out by captain Cristo Marrero.

"At no time will we leave any doubt as to our professionalism."

A former Tenerife player, Jesus Mora Nieto, known as Jesuli, said he received around 6,000 euros (7,600 dollars) to ensure the club lost a match on the last day of last season that allowed opponents Malaga to win promotion to the first division, the newspaper El Mundo said Monday.

He made the allegation in a taped conversation two weeks ago with Inaki Badiola, president of Real Sociedad, which failed to win promotion due to Malaga's victory.

"I cannot tell you if (my fellow players) took money, but, well, if I received I imagine that everyone also received it, no?" the player said, according to El Mundo.

Jesuli said in a statement later Monday that the comments were "inaccurate" and that they were made in a private conversation.

Vietnam enticing United

AFP, Hanoi

The Vietnam Football Federation (VFF) is negotiating to pay up to 2.47 million US dollars to entice Manchester United for a one-off game next year, with AC Milan also on its radar.

"This is a huge amount of money but we can arrange it. We can get money from tickets, advertising and broadcasting rights and so on," VFF chairman Nguyen Trong Hy was quoted as saying by the Asian Football Federation.

But negotiations with United are far from over. According to VFF, the Red Devils have insisted on strict conditions for the game, whose date has yet to be set.

United last played in Asia in 2007, with stops in Japan, South Korea, Macau and the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou.

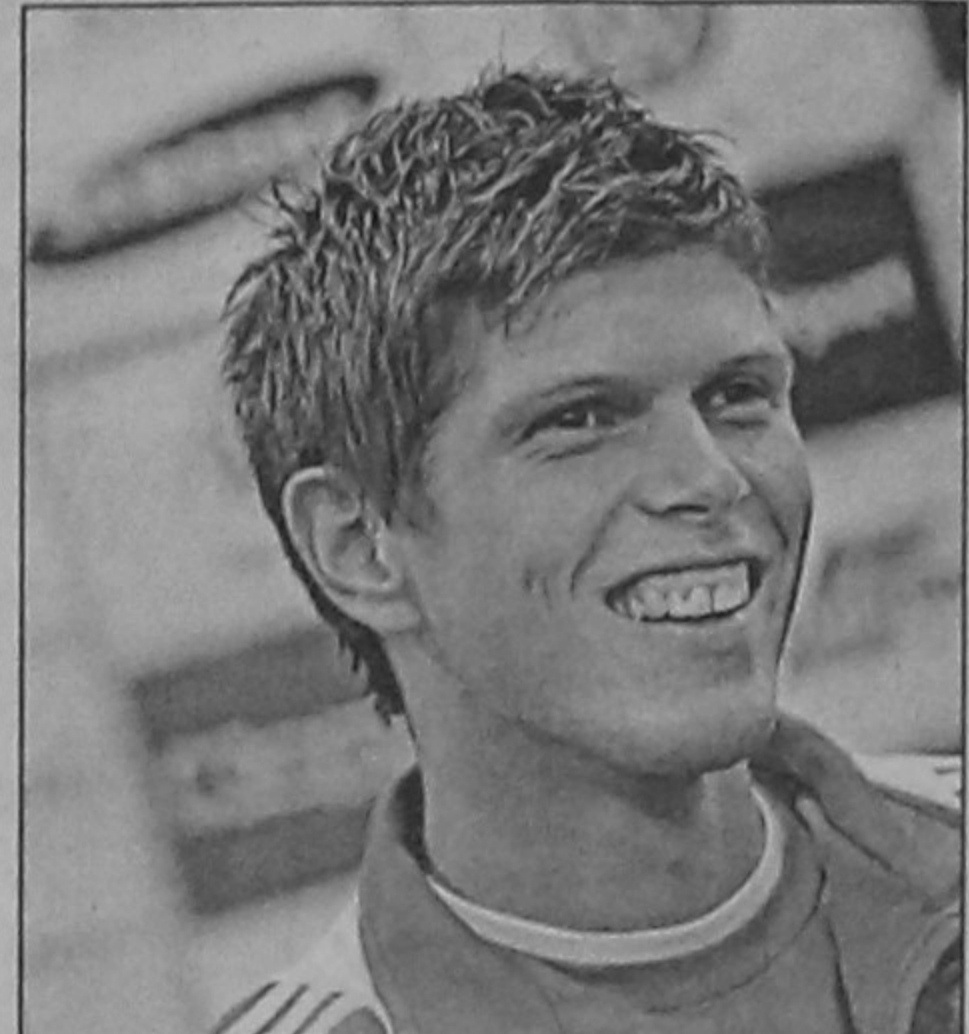
Real sign Huntelaar

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spanish champions Real Madrid, plagued by injuries and poor form this season, have signed Dutch international striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar from Ajax for 27 million euros, the two clubs said Tuesday.

The 25-year-old is expected to replace another Dutchman, Ruud van Nistelrooy, who



KLAAS-JAN HUNTELAAR

will miss the rest of the season after a knee operation.

"Huntelaar is now officially a new player at Real Madrid," the club said in a statement, which praised "his great positioning, oppor-

portunism and intelligence."

"The agreement is of course contingent upon the player passing a physical and signing his contract with Real Madrid," which would keep him at the club until June 30, 2013.

Ajax said the transfer fee was 27 million euros (34 million dollars) -- a fixed payment of 20 million euros and a "variable" fee of seven million euros.

Huntelaar is currently out of action due to an ankle injury and is not expected to be fit again until the middle of this month.

He has scored six goals in the Dutch first division this season after finishing as top scorer last season with 33 goals in 34 games played. He has also taken over from van Nistelrooy in the Dutch national side.

Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon said last week the club was "going to make two good signings in the month of December."

Real already have five Dutch players on their books - van Nistelrooy, Wesley Sneijder, Arjen Robben, Rafael van der Vaart and Royston Drenthe.

The reigning Spanish champions, currently fourth in the Primera Liga, last summer lost Brazilian Robinho to Manchester City and failed to sign Cristiano Ronaldo from Manchester United.

They have also been plagued by injuries this season.

In addition to van Nistelrooy, Robben has been unavailable since early last month.

On Saturday, three players -- Sneijder, Spanish defender Miguel Torres and Brazilian born Portuguese defender Pepe -- were injured during a 3-1 defeat to city rivals Getafe and will be out for between two weeks and a month.

Recent poor results have also led to press reports that German coach Bernd Schuster, who joined Real in July 2007, could be on his way out. However, Calderon on Monday gave him a cautious vote of confidence.

Casillas rejects City

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid goalkeeper Iker Casillas has rejected a move to big-spending Manchester City, which was ready to pay a world record 150 million euros for the Spanish international, Spanish media said.

Under the deal, Casillas would have received 13 million euros a year to play for the English Premier League side, bought in September by the Abu Dhabi United Group.

Private Spanish radio station Cadena Ser, which is usually well-informed, said Manchester City made the written offer to the player's

agent Luis Garcia Abad. It was not forwarded to Real as Casillas immediately rejected it, the radio said.

The offer of 150 million euros (190 million dollars, 129 million pounds) would dwarf the current world record 76 million euros paid by Real Madrid to Juventus for Zinedine Zidane in 2001.

Casillas, 27, nicknamed Saint Iker in Spain, is one of the world's best goalkeepers and played a leading role in Spain's Euro 2008 victory.

Seen as very loyal to Real, he currently receives around six million euros per year at the Spanish champions, and his contract with the club was extended last February through the 2016-17 season.

The buyout clause in the

contract is 150 million euros. Manchester City's new Arab owners have shown they are ready to pay huge sums to attract international stars to the club.

Italian newspaper Gazzetta dello Sport recently reported the club made an offer to sign Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon for 75 million euros.

Manchester City last summer acquired Brazilian striker Robinho for British record transfer fee of 42 million euros.

Spanish media said Wednesday Robinho has asked the club's owners to sign more big names, such as AC Milan's Kaka or Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo, winner of the 2008 Ballon d'Or award.

'I can get even better'

Football

AFP, London

As Cristiano Ronaldo contemplated a year that has brought him enough silverware to last a lifetime, the Manchester United winger could have been forgiven for resting on his laurels.

But the Portuguese playmaker is determined to make his star shine even brighter in 2009 after beating Barcelona's Lionel Messi and Liverpool striker Fernando Torres to the Ballon d'Or this week.

The award is given to Europe's top footballer and, on the back of a phenomenal 2007-08 season in which he scored 42 goals for his Premier League and Champions League-winning club, there is little doubt that Ronaldo deserved the prize, yet he believes he can get even better.

"I always play with pres-

sure because people always expect a lot from me and I don't think that will change," Ronaldo told United's website, www.manutd.com.

"Winning this award makes me feel very happy inside because it's one of the best days of my life."

"But my responsibilities are still the same; I want to continue to play well for my club and my country and try to do as well as last season."

"Of course I can improve - there are many things I still need to learn."

"You can never let yourself think you know everything. I am still very ambitious and I will continue to work very hard every day. I know it will be very hard to better last season, but I will try - if you don't try you win nothing. A new season means a new challenge and I want to help the team win more trophies."

Ronaldo becomes the first United player to win the award since the late George Best in 1968. Denis Law and Sir Bobby

Charlton were also honoured in the 60s and the Portuguese winger was proud to follow in the footsteps of three of Old Trafford's all-time greats.

"It's amazing that only four players in the club's history have won it, I didn't know that until yesterday," Ronaldo said.

"So it's special for the club and obviously for me and I feel very proud to be part of the history of the Ballon d'Or and the history of this club. You work hard to win team awards and personal awards, but to win this one is very special."

Ronaldo's success is also a triumph for Ferguson, who gambled 12 million pounds on the Portuguese, then a precocious teenager with Sporting Lisbon, after he ran rings around United in a friendly.

"We are very proud. Manchester United had been waiting for this for 40 years," Ferguson said.

"His award is beyond all possible dispute. He is only 23 years old. His best years are ahead of him."

Fortune gaining fame: The amazing football-gymnast

AFP, Santiago

They call it the o jogo bonito - the beautiful game - in Brazil and clearly the South Americans' women are right up there with the men when it comes to an ability to show off silky soccer skills.

The talent shows through early. Pele famously won the World Cup aged 17 and, although she hasn't reached those stellar heights yet, another 17-year-old is coming to prominence in the women's under-20 squad.

Leah Lynn Gabriela Fortune, born to American parents in Sao Paulo, has been making a name for herself with acrobatic throw-ins which are an assist in themselves given the havoc they create on landing in the penalty area.

Fortune, a keen gymnast who plays in defence for Team Chicago, hurls her missile throws after launching herself on the touchline with an eye-catching forward flip, a technique learned off father David.

"I don't do it for the spectacle - it's almost like a corner and it's a dangerous attacking weapon," says the teen, who moved to the United States as a toddler but who played a leading role in Brazil's run to the quarterfinals of the Under-20 world championships in Chile after being offered a trial last year.



LEAH LYNN GABRIELA FORTUNE

Monday, she and her teammates succumbed in their quarterfinal to Germany, but in the group phase Leah was outstanding, particularly in a 5-0 thumping of Mexico, when one of her throws directly led to a spectacular goal.

Leah says she learned her move aged just five and adds "I've been a football fan since I was just a couple of years old."

her parents moved to Chicago, taking their girl out of Brazil, it proved impossible to take Brazil out of the girl as her passion for football grew and grew.

In 2006, under-20 Brazilian coach Jorge Luiz Barcellos found out about her, as Chicago's Wheaton Academy had before him, and promptly brought her into the Brazilian fold - even though she does not speak Portuguese, unlike her parents, who are fluent.

"I've never spoken Portuguese so the first few training sessions were a little difficult - but football is a universal language," says the bubbly blue-eyed blonde.

"When I got the call up to the Brazilian squad it seemed too good an opportunity to pass up," says Leah.

"These girls are phenomenal, they treat football with a passion that I've never experienced in the United States. The way they live the game is incredible," she told FIFA.com ahead of the loss to the Germans, who advanced to the semis with goals from Sylvie Banecki, Nathalie Bock and Nicole Banecki to leave Leah's auriverde empty-handed despite her efforts.

The Germans moved on to a semi meeting with Leah's 'other homeland' the United States on Thursday while titleholders, having put out Japan, will meet France.

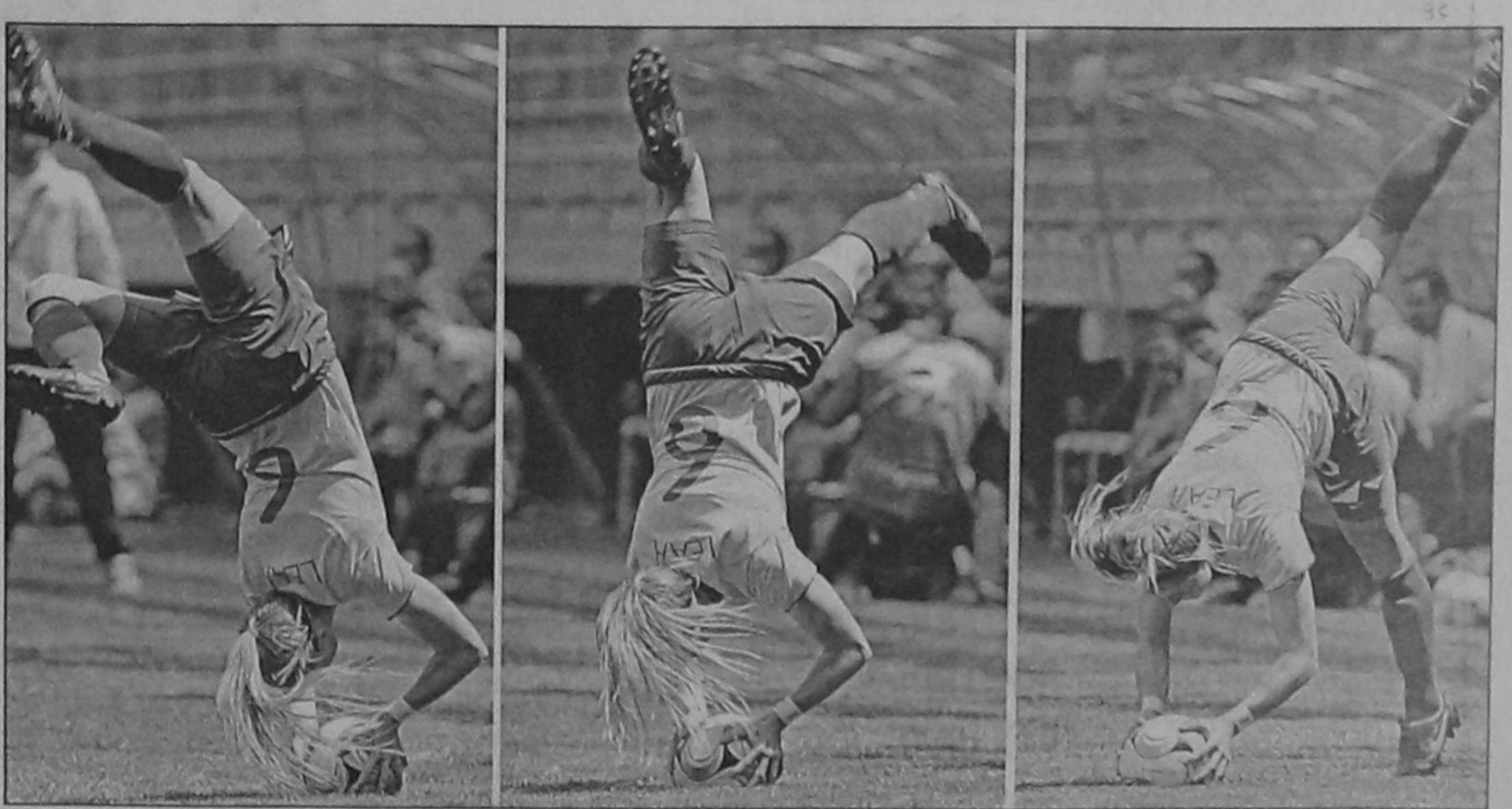


PHOTO: AFP
A three-picture combo shows Brazilian footballer Leah Fortune making a throw-in during their U-20 Women's World Cup match against Mexico in Temuco, Chile on November 23, 2008. Fortune surprised everyone during the tournament with her acrobatic leaps.