

Germans ditch winter break

AFP, Frankfurt

The Bundesliga's traditional winter break will be cut by three weeks to three-and-a-half weeks from the 2009-10 season, the German Football Federation announced Thursday.

The change to the German first division's calendar will allow the national team to prepare in better conditions for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, should it qualify, according to the federation.

The move means that the opening round of matches of the 2009-10 season will be held between August 7-10 with the 34th and final round of matches coming on May 8, 2010. The winter break will be between December 21 and January 15.

"The compromise found by the federation and the German league is absolutely positive for preparations for the 2010 World Cup," federation secretary-general Wolfgang Niersbach said.

German league chief Holger Hieronymus also welcomed the move.

"Our championship has the longest break in Europe. We need to have more week-end games because those played in midweek aren't interesting enough for the clubs from a financial point of view, or for the fans," he said.

Essien convinced Muntari

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan midfielder Sulley Muntari has revealed that close friend Michael Essien advised him to join the Italian giants in order to link up with Jose Mourinho.

Essien was signed by Mourinho from Lyon when the Portuguese was boss of Chelsea and when Muntari had the opportunity to join Inter from Portsmouth, Essien told his Ghana international teammate to jump at the chance.

Muntari and Essien have become close friends since starting for the Ghana side that reached the under-20 World Cup final in Argentina where the Africans lost 3-0 to the hosts.

"For me he is a brother. When the opportunity came up to join Inter he phoned me and said: 'Go without fear, Mourinho is there and with him you'll become a great player,'" Muntari told La Gazzetta dello Sport.

"At Chelsea, Michael did great with the gaffer. Mourinho is the most complete coach I've ever met. There are those who are there only on the pitch and then it's goodbye."

"But he is always available during the day and for anything."

Muntari has become a first choice starter under Mourinho, who has already made great waves in Italy, guiding Inter six points clear of fellow Italian giants AC Milan and Juventus in the Serie A standings.

Another coach that Muntari has a lot of respect for is AS Roma's Luciano Spalletti, who was Muntari's boss at Udinese, where the Ghanaian spent four seasons.

"I owe him everything, he's one of the most important people in my life," he said of Spalletti.

"Udinese was a vital stage in my career, it's a wonderful club."

Anderton calls it quits

AFP, London

Former England international midfielder Darren Anderton announced his retirement from football on Thursday.

The 36-year-old is currently at League Two side Bournemouth and will play his last game against Chester City on Saturday.

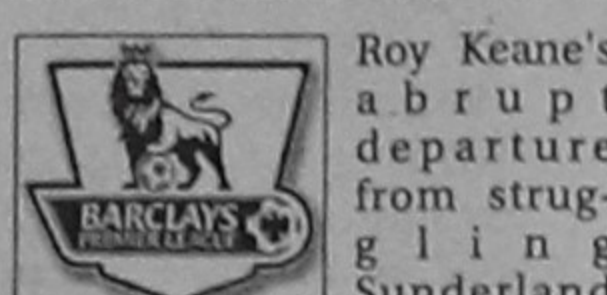
Anderton also played for Portsmouth, Tottenham, Birmingham and Wolves and won 30 caps for England, playing in the 1998 World Cup in France.

His last appearance will be the 569th game of his club career.

"It's a tough decision and Saturday will be a sad day," he told the Bournemouth Echo. "I've been lucky to come to Bournemouth and have really enjoyed it. It's been a great way to finish my career."

Focus shifts to Ince

AFP, London



Roy Keane's abrupt departure from struggling Sunderland has left his old Manchester United teammate Paul Ince on his own in the Premier League firing line.

Without a win in nine matches, Ince's Blackburn have slumped to second from bottom and with leaders Liverpool the visitors to Ewood Park on Saturday the odds must be on things getting worse before they start to get better.

A 5-3 League Cup defeat at Manchester United in midweek concluded with the travelling fans venting their frustration at Ince.

As he refused to speak to the press afterwards, Ince's exact state of mind is hard to gauge but it is safe to assume he is enduring the kind of intense pressure that led Keane to part company with Sunderland on Thursday.

Like Blackburn, the Black Cats are mired in the relegation zone and a trip to Old Trafford on Saturday offers little prospect of an immediate upturn in fortunes under the temporary leadership of Ricky Sbragia, the first-team coach under Keane.

Arsenal's defeat of Chelsea last weekend allowed Liverpool to pull clear at the top

of the league but Rafael Benitez's side have looked a little jaded in recent outings and will again be missing leading striker Fernando Torres on Saturday.

Of the top four, Chelsea look to have the toughest assignment with Luiz Felipe Scolari's men travelling to a Bolton side that has been steadily growing in confidence as the season has progressed.

Gary Megson's side helped to trigger Keane's departure from Sunderland with their 4-1 win at the Stadium of Light last weekend and assistant manager Chris Evans warned Chelsea they should not expect to have things all their own way.

"We are having a good run of form at the moment and we are playing very well," Evans said.

"Sometimes you don't get

what you deserve but if you have the belief then results will turn and that's exactly what's happened to us."

Key to Bolton's chances of taking something from Saturday's encounter will be the extent to which they keep their former striker, Nicolas Anelka, under control on his first return to the Reebok since he quit the club's midway through last season's relegation battle.

Carlos Tevez's four goals against Blackburn in midweek have given Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson a dilemma as he mulls his selection for Sunderland's visit.

Veteran Paul Scholes is ready for a return to United's midfield, two months after knee surgery, and Cristiano Ronaldo could be in the mood to celebrate winning the Ballon d'Or, which he is due to be presented with on Sunday.

Arsenal's hopes of challenging for their first title since 2004 were revived by their defeat of Chelsea last weekend but, having lost five times already this season, Arsene Wenger's side's margin for further error remains limited.

Wigan are the visitors to the Emirates on Saturday and Steve Bruce's side will be bolstered by the return of Egypt forward Amr Zaki, the most prolific striker in the league before he was sidelined by rib and calf injuries earlier this month.

FIXTURES	
(1500 GMT unless stated)	
Saturday	
Arsenal v Wigan, Blackburn v Liverpool, Bolton v Chelsea, Fulham v Manchester City (1245 GMT), Hull City v Middlesbrough, Manchester Utd v Sunderland (1730 GMT), Newcastle v Stoke City	
Sunday	
Everton v Aston Villa (1600 GMT), West Brom v Portsmouth (1500 GMT)	
Monday	
West Ham v Tottenham (2000 GMT)	

That's it for Keane?

Football

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson says there is no guarantee Roy Keane will return to football after seeing the former Manchester United captain walk out on his job as Sunderland manager just 48 hours before Saturday's Premier League clash with United at Old Trafford.

Keane's future is now open to debate following his decision to end his two-year reign at Sunderland with the club sitting in the Premier League's bottom three.

And Ferguson, who worked with the fiery Irishman for twelve years at United and it's a pity that Keane might now choose not to return to management following his first attempt at the job at Sunderland.

Ferguson said: "We all wish Roy well because he was a great player here at United and it's a pity that he has left Sunderland. It's difficult to say whether he will want to come back into management or not."

"But there are very few managers that last more than 3-4 years at a club nowadays and the lifespan of a manager at a club is getting shorter and shorter."

"They can move on to different challenges, but it's a very precarious industry nowadays and a very emotional game."

"A couple of years ago, people were saying that I should have gone four years earlier -- the black

flags were out! Football people like myself are fortunate to have been at a club for so long, though. I haven't had to go through that emotional situation."

"Roy was an incredible controversial character, though. He always had something to say about the game, even as a player. And he did a good job at Sunderland."

United face Sunderland with Scotland midfielder Darren Fletcher struggling to overcome a hamstring injury. Veteran midfielder Paul Scholes is set for another stint on the bench, however, after returning from a two-month knee injury lay-off in the midweek 5-3 League Cup win against Blackburn.

Argentinian striker Carlos Tevez has been credited with four of United's goals in that quarterfinal victory and, despite his reduced involvement since the September arrival of Dimitar Berbatov, Ferguson insists that he still has a role to play at Old Trafford.

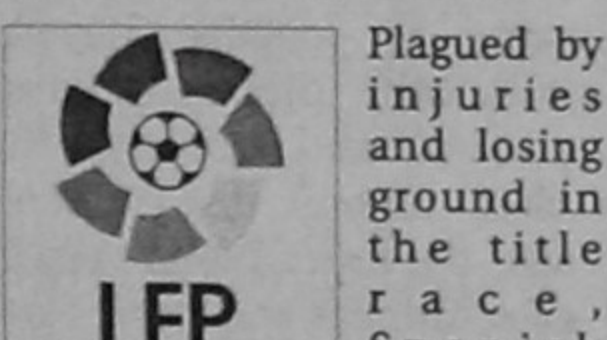
He said: "Without question, Carlos has given me a big selection problem and I have been doodling on my notepad over the last couple of days, trying to work out how I can fit all these players in."

"He gave a fantastic performance of energy, aggression and running. He is always a tryer and I admire him for that, but it doesn't make my job any easier!"

"It's obvious that he doesn't enjoy not playing. He wants to play, but do I want players who don't like being left out or do I want players who are happy to sit in the stand?"

Real try to keep pace

AFP, Madrid



Plagued by injuries and losing ground in the title race, Spanish champions Real Madrid are desperately trying to cling on to the coat-tails of leaders Barcelona ahead of 'El Clasico' at Camp Nou on December 14.

Real already trail Barcelona by six points and under-fire coach Bernd Schuster will be aware that his side can't afford to fall further behind.

Fourth-placed Real are at home to Sevilla, two points behind them in fifth, on Sunday as they bid to get last weekend's 3-1 derby defeat to Getafe out of their system.

"You have to bear in mind that there are lots of points left in the season," said Real cap-

tain Raul. "We like difficult challenges and we are not going to hide."

Sevilla, thrashed 3-0 by Barcelona last time out, have only lost once on their travels and will be looking to take advantage of a Real team depleted by injuries.

Gabriel Heinze, Pepe, Wesley Sneijder, Ruud van Nistelrooy, Mahamadou Diarra and Miguel Torres are all sidelined with Ruben de la Red also missing through health reasons.

"These things sometimes happen. It is just bad luck," said Italian centre-half Fabio Cannavaro.

The gravity of the situation has persuaded Schuster to go out and sign Ajax striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar, who is out with an ankle injury, for 20 million euros with the Dutch international signing until 2013.

Barcelona, unbeaten since

an opening day loss to Numancia, are flying at the top and know three points at home to Valencia on Sunday would pile the pressure on Real for 'El Clasico' the following week.

Last December Real beat Barca 1-0 with Julio Baptista, who has now left the club, scoring the winner to move seven points clear at the top and their rivals never recovered.

The tables have now been turned and Barca will be hoping to take a giant step towards the championship.

"I knew the team was capable of playing like we are doing now," said French forward Thierry Henry. "However, Valencia have a good defence and have not lost away from home so we will have to be at our best."

Valencia lie third, five points behind Barcelona and this appears a perfect opportunity to lay down a title marker.

Villarreal are a point above Valencia in second and on Saturday they host Getafe who seem to relish playing against the top sides having beaten Real and drawn 1-1 with Barca.

With four out of the top five in action against each other Atletico Madrid hope to make up ground at promoted Sporting Gijon.

"We have qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League so now we need to take our European form into the league," explained winger Simao.

FIXTURES	
Saturday	
Villarreal v Getafe, Sporting Gijon v Atletico Madrid, Barcelona v Valencia	
Sunday	
Real Mallorca v Recreativo Huelva, Osasuna v Valladolid, Deportivo La Coruna v Malaga, Numancia v Almeria, Racing Santander v Athletic Bilbao, Real Betis v Espanyol, Real Madrid v Sevilla.	



Wolfsburg striker Zvezdan Misimovic (R) runs past Portsmouth goalkeeper David James to score the third goal during their UEFA Cup match in Wolfsburg on Thursday.

UEFA CUP SCORES

AFP, Paris

Group E
Heerenveen (NED) 1 (Sibon 19) Sporting Braga (POR) 2 (Rentleria 35, Aguiar 56)
Wolfsburg (GER) 3 (Dzeko 3, Gentner 23, Misimovic 74) Portsmouth (ENG) 2 (Defoe 11, Mvuemba 14)

Group F
Slavia Prague (CZE) 0 Hamburg (GER) 2 (Olic 30, Petric 90-pen)
Aston Villa (ENG) 1 (Delfo 28) MSK Zilina (SVK) 2 (Leitner 16, Styvar 19)

Group G
Valencia (ESP) 1 (Zigic 60) Bruges (BEL) 1 (Alcaraz 19)
FC Copenhagen (DEN) 1 (Antonsson 85) Rosenborg (NOR) 1 (Iversen 33)

Group H
Lech Poznan (POL) 1 (Rengifo 41) Deportivo La Coruna (ESP) 1 (Colotto 2)
Nancy (FRA) 3 (Zerka 5, Feret 72, Camerling 79) CSKA Moscow (RUS) 4 (Vagner Love 23, 62, 88, Ramon 33)

Wednesday
Group A
Manchester City (ENG) 0 Paris St Germain (FRA) 0

FC Twente (NED) 2 (Wielandt 3, Perez 55) Schalke 04 (GER) 1 (Asamoah 77)

Group B
Metalist Kharkiv (UKR) 1 (Edmar 87) Olympiacos (GRE) 0 Hertha Berlin (GER) 0 Galatasaray (TUR) 1 (Baros 69-pen)

Group C
Standard Liege (BEL) 3 (De Camargo 23, Onyewu 35, Jovanovic 42) Sampdoria (ITA) 0 Sevilla (ESP) 3 (Luis Fabiano 32-pen, 73, Renato 46) Partizan Belgrade (SRB) 0

Group D
Spartak Moscow (RUS) 1 (Kovalchuk 2) NEC Nijmegen (NED) 2 (Van Beukering 84, Schone 87)
Udinese (ITA) 2 (Quagliarella 5, Obodo 78) Dinamo Zagreb (CRO) 1 (Biscan 90)

Wolves raze Pompey

AFP, Paris



Portsmouth's first UEFA Cup campaign ended in heartbreak on Thursday with a 3-2 defeat at Wolfsburg which featured

another embarrassing howler from England goalkeeper David James

Pompey surrendered a 2-1 lead in the Group E clash and their fate was sealed when Sporting Braga defeated Heerenveen 2-1 to secure the third qualifying place in the pool behind AC Milan and their German conquerors.

"I'm disappointed, we made mistakes, but Wolfsburg are a very good outfit," said Portsmouth boss Tony Adams.

Fellow English Premier League side Aston Villa made sure of their place in the last 32 despite suffering a shock 2-1 home defeat to Slovakia's MSK Zilina.

Their passage to the knock-out round was assured when SV Hamburg defeated Slavia Prague 2-0 which allowed Ajax,

who didn't play Thursday, to also qualify from Group F.

Portsmouth, who had squandered a 2-0 lead to draw 2-2 with AC Milan at Fratton Park last week, needed to win in Germany.

But Wolfsburg, with two wins from their first two games, were ahead after just three minutes when Edin Dzeko scored from Christian Gentner's right-wing cross.

Pompey then stormed into a 2-1 lead with Jermain Defoe finding the net from Armand Traore's cross in the 11th minute before Arnold Mvuemba scored with a long distance drive three minutes later.

Gentner then levelled for Wolfsburg after 23-minutes with Zvezdan Misimovic hitting the decisive third in the 74th minute after a terrible mistake by James.

The England stopper gifted the goal when he allowed Misimovic to take the ball off his feet and roll it into the net.

James then partially made amends when he saved an 80th-minute Misimovic penalty which was awarded when Sol Campbell chopped down Dzeko.

Adams refused to criticise James.

"David is a fantastic goal-

keeper, he's saved us penalties and he has set up the first goal," said the manager. "I've got great faith in him and I love him to bits."

Croatian duo Ivica Olic and Mladen Petric, with a last-minute penalty, gave Hamburg, coached by former Spurs boss Martin Jol, their 2-0 win in Prague.

That was a blessing for Martin O'Neill's Aston Villa who fell behind to goals from MSK Zilina's Vladimir Leitner, who was later sent off, and Peter Styvar.

Nathan Delfouneso pulled one back on his full debut for Villa.

"I don't think we started well enough and we made silly mistakes and from then on it was going to be an uphill struggle," said Villa midfielder Nigel Reo-Coker.

Brazilian striker Vagner Love hit a hat-trick as CSKA Moscow, the 2005 UEFA Cup winners, made it four wins in four with a 4-3 win at French side Nancy in Group H.

In Group G, St Etienne, who have already qualified, were joined in the last 32 by Valencia after the Spanish side's 1-1 home draw with Club Bruges.

Juve, Milan set sights

AFP, Rome



AC Milan and Juventus will try to reduce the gap on leaders Inter Milan as the champions

face a tough match at the weekend with a trip to high flying Lazio.

The capital based club sit one

place and one point off the Champions League qualifying places and earned a morale-boosting 2-1 victory at Milan in the Italian Cup on Wednesday.

Their controversial president Claudio Lotito claimed that Jose Mourinho's leaders hold no fears for him.

"I've never feared anyone. Lazio can match anyone. I hope that against the black-and-blues (Inter) we'll be able to show the

same competitive spirit and to affirm on the pitch our abilities and determination," he said.

"(Against Milan) we showed our true potential, we deserved to win and played great football."

There are three more games to go before the winter break when the Serie A season shuts down for three weeks.

Juventus centre-back Giorgio Chiellini has set his teammates a target of three wins in a row before the break if they are to hang onto Inter's coat-tails, starting with the trip to Lecce on Sunday.

Juve have won six of their last seven Serie A matches but crucially lost to Inter at the San Siro in that spell.

"There's three more matches and we have to do everything to take home nine points," he said.

One of the big problems for Inter's two main rivals, though, is that they face each other in a week's time.

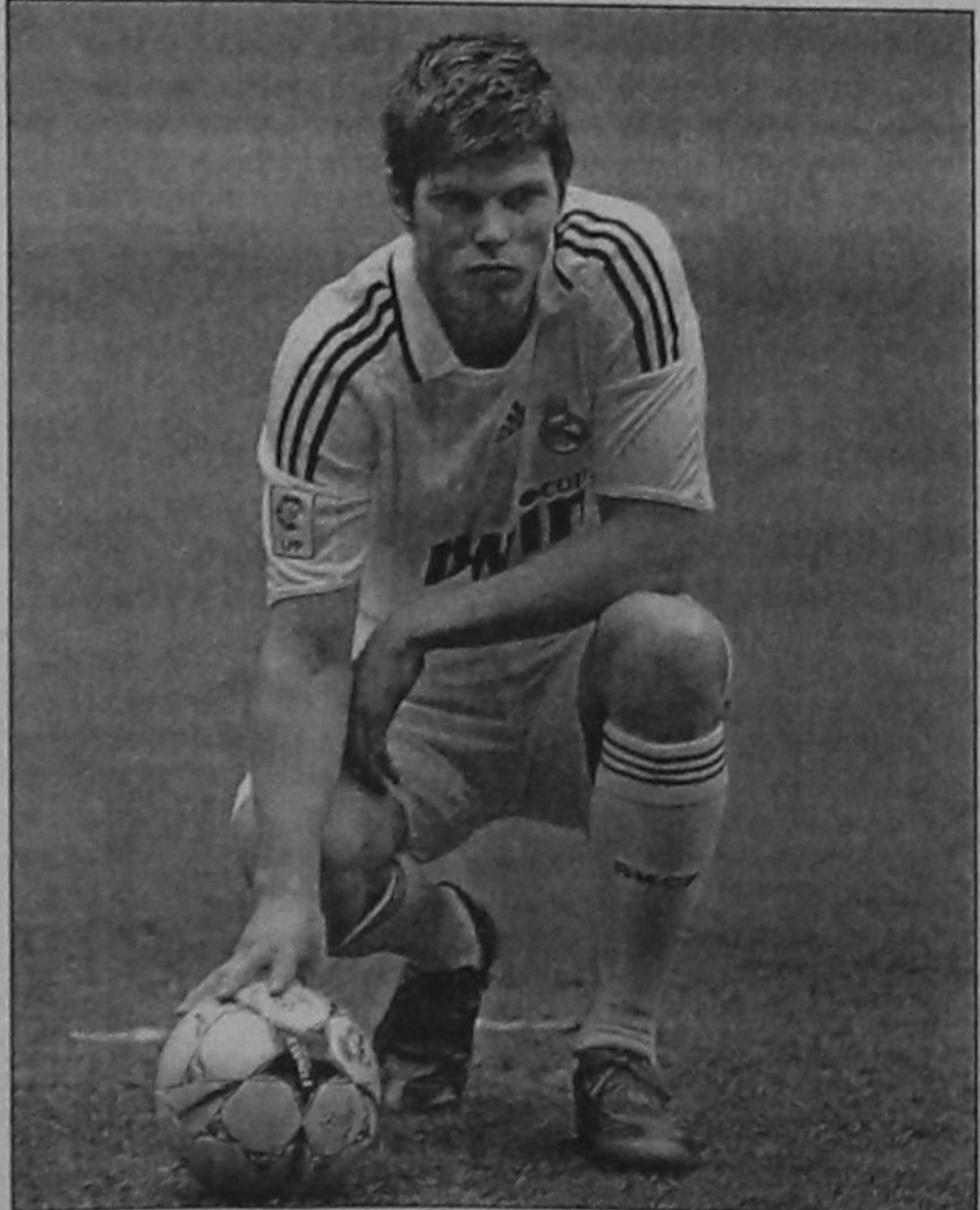
"We have two away games against teams that give 110 per cent and in between is the tough challenge with Milan, a match with three times as much importance."

Milan seem to have the simplest task of the big three this weekend as they host Sicilians Catania, who themselves have been having a great season and had they won at home to Lecce last week would have entered the top four.

Milan's biggest problem is that their form has not been good of late.

They lost at home to Lazio in the cup just a few days after they were beaten 3-1 at another Sicilian team, Palermo.

FIXTURES	
Saturday	
Chievo v Roma, Lazio v Inter Milan	
Sunday	
AC Milan v Catania, Atalanta v Udinese, Cagliari v Palermo, Lecce v Juventus, Napoli v Siena, Reggina v Bologna, Sampdoria v Genoa, Torino v Fiorentina	



Real Madrid's new recruit Dutch striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar poses during his presentation at Santiago Bernabeu on Thursday.



GET IT OVER THE BAR: All Blacks star Dan Carter (L), widely recognized as the best rugby player in the world, shows AC Milan's Brazilian superstar Kaka the technique behind shooting a rugby ball during a visit to the Milan training complex on Friday.