

Scholes has 2 years left in him

AFP, Yokohama

Sir Alex Ferguson sung the praises of Paul Scholes on Wednesday, saying he believed he had another two years left in him.

Scholes, 34, returned to action earlier this month two months after suffering knee ligament damage that required corrective surgery, and Ferguson said he was getting back to his best.

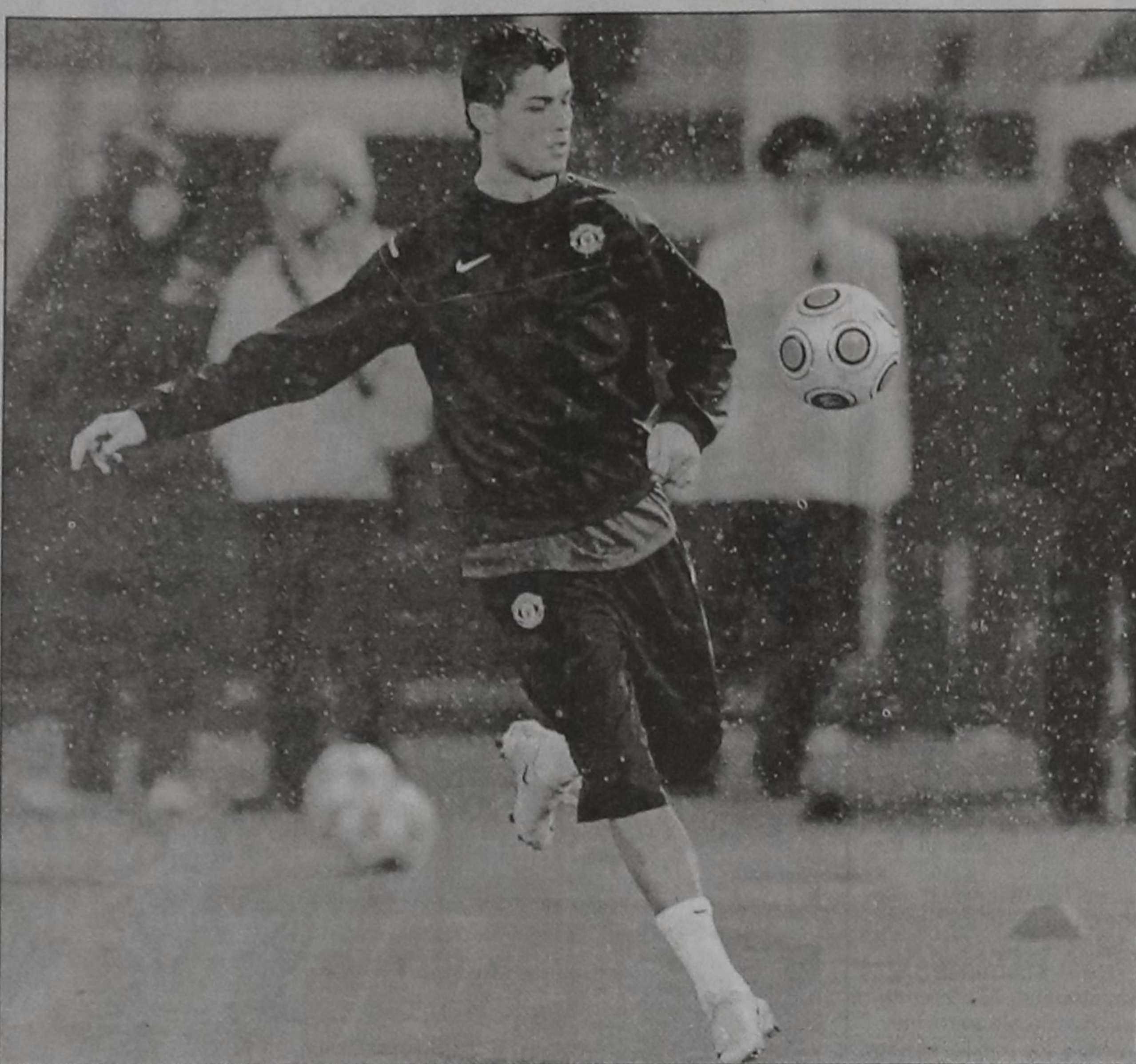
"Paul brings an order to a game at times. We saw that in the second half against Aalborg (in the Champions League last week). It was important in helping us take control of the game," he said.

"He has been a fantastic player for us. When he was younger he would score 12-15 goals a season for us. He can't do that now but he brings other things to a game -- his intelligence on the field is terrific."

Ferguson added that Scholes' game hasn't lost anything.

"I mean he's 34 and he's not going to improve but what we're hoping is that he keeps at a level we know he is at now. Hopefully he can retain that for another year, or two years," he said.

"I don't see any discerning negatives about Paul. I hope he can keep it going for a long time."



Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo kicks the ball during a training session at the International Stadium in Tokyo on Wednesday. The European champions take on Japan's Gamba Osaka in a Club World Cup semifinal today.

Gamba test for MU

Football

AFP, Yokohama

A defiant Gamba Osaka insist they are not afraid of Manchester United, but the Japanese team face a daunting task against the European champions in their Club World Cup semifinal Thursday.

It will be one of the biggest games in Gamba's history, but they are handicapped by injuries to attacking midfielders Takahiro Futagawa and Hayato Sasaki, who were stretchered off during their win over Adelaide on Sunday.

A consolation is that United are also struggling, with Dimitar Berbatov sick with a virus and ruled out of the game, while Wayne Rooney is a doubt after picking up an injury in training.

Gamba captain Satoshi Yamaguchi believes they have what it takes to tame the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo and Rooney, should he play.

"We have nothing to lose and we'll go all out, leave everything out there on the pitch," he said.

"We don't want to be thinking after the match that we should have done this and that, and as long as we're playing them, we'll play to win. But we need to make sure we don't play like we did against Adelaide."

In that game, the Asian champions were lucky to survive, with the influential Yasuhito Endo scoring the only goal.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson watched the match on DVD and pinpointed Endo as the danger man, along with their Brazilian striker Lucas.

"He is their star player," the Scot said of Endo. "Not only did he score the decisive goal, he was the influential player in terms of possession of the ball."

"He actually changed his position from

where he normally plays behind the centre forward after they lost two players in the first 18 minutes and played towards the left-hand side. And it worked very well.

"Their Brazilian centre forward (Lucas) is also a very good player. He has quick feet and, unusually for a Brazilian, he is tall. He is a very effective player."

Ferguson, who has defended United's decision to make the long trip to Japan in mid-season, would not be drawn on his starting 11.

But he said veterans Paul Scholes, Gary Neville and Ryan Giggs would all play.

"They have played a lot of big games and their experience will be vital," he said, adding that Ronaldo was also a definite starter.

United are eager to win the tournament and add a new trophy to their collection, but Ferguson is aware that Japanese football has improved in recent years and he is not being complacent.

"I've experienced playing in Japan before. We played Urawa Reds twice and they were very difficult opposition because they played with great enthusiasm," he said.

"The improvement in Japanese football is obvious. There is a tremendous improvement in the organisation and team's abilities, so we're expecting a hard game on Thursday."

"Hopefully it is one we can win and go to the final."

Despite United's superior skills, physical strength and experience, Gamba coach Akira Nishino suggested an upset was not just a dream.

Admitting his side's chances of creating an upset are "close to nil", Nishino said: "We will face them without fear."

"Tomorrow will be a great day for Gamba. We are ready to give 100 per cent for the challenge tomorrow," he added.

The Club World Cup, first organised in its current format in 2005, is an extension of the Intercontinental Cup contested by European and South American champion clubs.

Spurs eye next round

AFP, Paris



Few would have expected relegation from the English Premiership to cloud the thoughts of Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester City during their UEFA Cup forays this season.

But Europe has become a distraction with both clubs currently in the bottom six.

The irony of the situation will not be lost on fans of Portsmouth, comfortably ensconced domestically in mid-table but who will exit the tournament even if they beat Dutch side Heerenveen.

Despite just failing to beat AC Milan at Fratton Park Portsmouth are already out after losing to Germany's Wolfsburg, who now travel to Italy knowing they and their opponents are already through.

Former Pompey coach Harry Redknapp's new side Spurs are in contrast very much still interested in a competition they won in 1972 and 1984 - though Premiership survival is the priority as they are just a point above the drop zone.

Spurs lie second in Group D

behind Italy's Udinese going into Thursday's game at home to Spartak Moscow but avoiding defeat will be enough to go through as the top three sides advance.

Udinese, already through, are at Dutch outfit NEC Nijmegen, who still harbour lingering hopes along with Spartak.

Mark Hughes' Manchester City are already through from Group A, which they top with seven points from three games, ahead of Thursday's trip to Spain to face Real Santander.

But the heat is on at home with City only ahead of third-bottom Sunderland on goal difference.

City will be without hamstring victim Benjani Mwaruwaru for the match and the Zimbabwe striker is set to be out for several weeks, prompting Hughes to observe that despite the backing of their wealthy Abu Dhabi consortium owners and the signing of Brazilian star Robinho "we're a little bit light on numbers at the moment."

Spurs also have an injury crisis and Redknapp may throw youngster Dean Parrett, just 17, into the fray for a senior debut given that Vedran Corluka and Roman Pavlyuchenko are both ineligible.

John Bostock, 16, may also

feature.

"Thursday is a big headache for us," Redknapp said.

"We've got John Bostock and Dean Parrett, I'll throw them in and let's see what they can do."

Skipper Ledley King is set to be rested and Jonathan Woodgate is out with a back problem and Jermaine Jenas and Fraizer Campbell are also injured.

Whereas England and Spain have a full house of four teams in the last 16 of the far more lucrative Champions League, France, whose only survivor is Lyon, are happy to have other sides still engaged in European competition at all.

With Marseille and Bordeaux dropping down into the UEFA Cup after failing to make the Champions League cut and with Saint Etienne already through from their UEFA Cup pool Nancy and Paris Saint Germain will try to join them.

Nancy need a draw Wednesday against Cologne of Germany and PSG need a win over Steve McClaren's second-placed FC Twente on Thursday.

In Group F, Hamburg, coached by former Spurs boss Martin Jol, host Aston Villa with both sides through alongside Ajax.

All three are former European champions.

Pompey accept Diarra bid

AFP, Portsmouth

Portsmouth have accepted a "substantial bid" from Real Madrid for Lassana Diarra, the Premier League club said in a statement on their website here Wednesday.

France international midfielder Diarra, 23, has been given permission by the south coast side to speak to the Spanish giants.

"Portsmouth Football Club can confirm they have accepted a substantial bid from Real Madrid for Lassana Diarra," the statement said.

A Pompey spokesman added: "We have always said that we would only allow our players to leave if we received an exceptional bid."

"We could not stand in the way of such a move as this for Lassana."

He added: "It shows how far the club have come under the ownership of Alexandre Gaydamak when Real Madrid come in for one of our players."

"Should the deal be completed, the club has already identified possible replacements."

Diarra, who has scored three goals in 30 games for Portsmouth, played a key role in helping the club win the FA Cup last season - the first time Pompey had lifted the trophy in 69 years.

Real have been on the lookout for a defensive midfielder since Mali international Mahamadou Diarra was last week sidelined for the rest of the season after undergoing knee surgery.

Diarra, who has also played for Premier League giants Chelsea and Arsenal, would appear to fit the bill.

Reports in the British press have estimated the value of the deal at around 20 million pounds, which would represent a welcome cash injection for a Portsmouth club which Gayadamak has said he is prepared to sell.

Eduardo makes successful return

AFP, London

Arsenal's Croatian international striker Eduardo made a successful return to action after being out for 10 months after suffering a broken left leg and dislocating his left ankle.

The 25-year-old Brazilian-born striker came through the first 45 minutes of a reserve game against Portsmouth and professed himself to be mightily relieved even to be playing after the horror tackle by Martin Taylor of Birmingham at the end of February had many fearing it had ended his career.

"I am feeling very happy to have started my first game in 10 months," he said.

"I hope I can do more and that next time will be better. I just felt something in my hamstring but in two weeks I will be all right."

The injury cost both Arsenal and the player dear as they ended up trophyless and Eduardo also missed the Euro 2008 championships where Croatia sparked before bowing out to Turkey in the quarterfinals.

He underwent an intensive rehabilitation programme that included spells in his native Brazil.

Rovers appoint Allardyce

Football

AFP, London

Former Bolton and Newcastle boss Sam Allardyce was appointed the manager of Blackburn Rovers on a three-year contract, the English Premier League strugglers announced Wednesday, a day after they had sacked Paul Ince.

"Blackburn Rovers are delighted to announce the appointment of Sam Allardyce as manager with immediate effect," a statement on the club's official website said. "Sam has signed a three-year contract."

The statement added: "A press conference will be held at Ewood Park at 4pm (1600GMT) tomorrow (Thursday)."

Blackburn are currently second-bottom in the lucrative Premier League and facing relegation, having won just three out of 17 games - all under Ince who took over in June - so far this season.

Allardyce, 54, was a candidate for the post of Blackburn manager when Ince was appointed after Mark Hughes's departure to join Premier League rivals Manchester City.

He had eight years in charge of Bolton, establishing

Rovers' fellow Lancashire side in the Premier League and making them tough to beat.

Allardyce took charge of Newcastle before the start of last season before being sacked in January by then new owner Mike Ashley.

No sooner had Blackburn chairman John Williams announced Ince's departure on Tuesday, he made clear his intention to bring in a new manager to Ewood Park as quickly as possible.

Former Blackburn manager Graeme Souness was the initial favourite to succeed Ince but the Scot ruled himself out of the running earlier on Wednesday.

Ince, 41, who followed former Manchester United teammate as Rovers manager, was sacked six months into a three-year contract.

Williams said Tuesday the north-west club had been left with little option as they sought to preserve their Premier League status.

The first black British manager in English football's top flight, there was plenty of goodwill towards Ince, who had risen through the ranks after managing in the country's lower divisions, with Macclesfield and MK Dons - whom he led to the League Two (fourth-tier) title before moving to Ewood Park.

Rio writes off Gunners

AFP, Yokohama



Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand has written off Arsenal's title hopes, believing it will become a three-way battle between the defending champions, Chelsea and Liverpool.

Arsenal are eight points behind leaders Liverpool, seven adrift of Chelsea and two off United.

"I presume us, Chelsea and Liverpool will start pulling away a bit after Christmas," Ferdinand told BBC radio from Tokyo where United are competing in the Club World Cup of continental champions.

"It's not beyond them (Arsenal), it's just my personal opinion that it will be between us three this season."

Arsene Wenger's side are languishing in fifth place after surrendering the lead in a 1-1 draw with Middlesbrough on Saturday.

At the same time, Aston Villa's 4-2 win over Bolton Wanderers took Martin O'Neill's side into fourth.

United, who drew 0-0 with Spurs last Saturday, will miss next weekend's round of Premier League matches, but Ferdinand said everyone would be keeping a close eye on what was happening.

"West Ham getting a draw at Chelsea was a surprise as well. There have been quite a few unusual results this season but I am sure it is good for the fans."

our game, but when you look back on it you can take it that we came out of it better than anyone else because we drew away and the other teams drew at home.

"We can take some comfort from that but it would have been nice to have got the three points. We would have been sitting a lot prettier than we are now."

"It looks like teams will drop points. Hull going to Anfield and getting a draw is a massive result for them. Who would have said that before the season kicked off?"

"West Ham getting a draw at Chelsea was a surprise as well. There have been quite a few unusual results this season but I am sure it is good for the fans."

CLUB WORLD CUP

Liga storm into final

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Ecuador's Liga de Quito stormed into the final of the Club World Cup on Wednesday with a 2-0 defeat of Mexico's Pachuca, setting up a potential clash with Manchester United.

In persistent rain, Claudio Bieler and Luis Bolanos did the damage with first-half goals for the South American champions.

Liga started at a furious pace and were ahead after just four minutes when striker Bieler capitalised on a defensive blunder.

The Argentine pounced when a Pachuca clearance bounced off the legs of one of their own defenders and into his path and he slid the ball underneath diving goalkeeper Miguel Calero.

It took Pachuca 10 minutes to wake up but when they did

they were unlucky not to level the game.

A break down the left by Jose Cardenas fed Damian Alvarez who played the ball into the box but after a goalmouth scramble Liga eventually cleared.

Pachuca though appeared anxious and Julio Manzur was booked for handball on the edge of the penalty area on 25 minutes.

Liga took a decisive 2-0 lead from the resulting freekick when Bolanos curled the ball round the wall with his right foot from 25 yards, giving no chance to Calero, whose view was blocked.

CONCACAF champions Pachuca nearly pulled one back minutes later when Jose Cardenas appeared to be shoved from behind as he went to head into an empty net, but the referee waved play on.

With 70 per cent possession in the first half, Pachuca should have done better. They went to the break 2-0 down in

their quarterfinal against Egypt's Al Ahly and won 4-2, but it wasn't to be against Liga.

They pushed forward in the second half with Liga seemingly content to defend their lead, but Pachuca couldn't find the elusive goal despite a series of chances and the match descended into a scrappy encounter.

Historically one of the strongest teams in Ecuador, Liga blew a glorious chance to add a third goal in the dying seconds when substitute Reinaldo Navia blasted over the bar with just the keeper to beat.

Despite the loss, it was one game better than last year for the Mexicans, who crashed at the quarterfinal stage in 2007.

Liga can now look forward to a final against either Manchester United or Japan's Gamba Osaka, who play their semifinal in Yokohama on Thursday. Pachuca play the loser of that match for third place.

Kewell needs a month

AFP, Sydney

Star Australian footballer Harry Kewell expects to return to training within a month following a hernia operation in Sydney, national team coach Pim Verbeek said Wednesday.

The former Liverpool player injured himself last month playing for Turkish club Galatasaray and returned home for the minor surgery.

Dutchman Verbeek said the Socceroo was now resting in Sydney after the operation earlier this week.

"Harry is fine and is aiming to start training again in three to four weeks' time," Verbeek said in a statement.

Kewell could have delayed the surgery but decided to treat the problem because Galatasaray are already through to the latter stages of the UEFA Cup and the Turkish league is about to take a winter break.

"Harry's a tough customer and is used to playing with, and through, injury over most of his career," Verbeek said.

"But this is an injury that could be dealt with efficiently."

Kewell, who has scored eight goals in 16 appearances for Galatasaray, has been in outstanding form for the Turkish giants this season.

Verbeek said Kewell was looking forward to playing for the Socceroos, who play their next Asian World Cup qualifier against Japan in Yokohama on February 11, as soon as possible.

"I know from talking to Harry that he is very happy with the medical treatment he has received and he is hoping to be on the park ahead of schedule," Verbeek said.

Kewell is expected to return to Istanbul after spending the Christmas holidays with his family in Australia.



Ecuador's Liga de Quito midfielder Luis Bolanos (jersey number 7) scores the second goal from a freekick against Mexico's Pachuca in the Club World Cup semifinal in Tokyo on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP