### **Everton test** for Gunners

AFP, London

Game by game and piece by piece, Arsenal are beginning to stitch their tattered season back together.

The north Londoners' recent performances may have lacked some of their renowned swagger, but for the moment manager Arsene Wenger is not complaining.

An eight-game unbeaten run is the club's best of the season and such consistency is welcome given the way they scaled euphoric highs and plunged to desperate lows earlier in the campaign.

There is still work to be done - the Gunners may be undefeated since December 10 but they have been held to four draws since then - and a trip to Everton on Wednesday will test the side's new-found resolve, but at least foundations have been laid for a lateseason charge.

Arsenal, currently fifth in the table to Everton's sixth, can ill afford any slip-ups.

With Aston Villa showing no sign of losing momentum in their own quest to break into the English Premier League's top four, any dropped points could be decisive in the final reckon-

Indeed, for all the talk of Villa gatecrashing the established elite, it has been rather overlooked that Everton themselves could draw to within two points of Arsenal with a win at Goodison Park.

Nevertheless, Arsenal manager Wenger can afford to feel bullish. The club's crippling injury list is starting to ease, albeit gradually: William Gallas should be ready to return to the heart of the defence on Merseyside, while Eduardo da Silva's rehabilitation from a badly broken leg continues apace, with the club hopeful he could be fit for a first team comeback next month.

A similar date has been set for Theo Walcott, who is progressing well from his dislocated shoulder.

Even Tomas Rosicky, the Czech midfielder who has spent so long on the sidelines many Arsenal fans must have forgotten he is even on their books, has started light training again, although there is still no immediate hope of a competitive return.

Arsenal's revival will be subjected to a rigorous examination at Goodison, where they will meet an Everton side brimful with belief.

David Moyes's men upset the odds twice against their city neighbours Liverpool last week, holding the title contenders to league and FA Cup draws at Anfield, and are also unbeaten in eight games.

### Abbondanzieri rejoins Boca

AFP, Madrid

Getafe's Argentina international keeper Roberto "Pato" Abbondanzieri has signed a two-year contract with former club Boca Juniors for 400,000 euros, the Spanish first division club said on Monday.

The 36-year-old Abbondanzieri, who played at Boca Juniors from 1997 to 2006, has played 44 times for his country, appearing at the 2006 World Cup finals, and was voted the Spanish league's best keeper in the 2006/07 season.

### Mikel charged with drunk driving

AFP, London

Chelsea and Nigeria's John Obi Mikel has been charged with drinking and driving, police confirmed Monday.

The 21-year-old was stopped by police at 5.30am (0530GMT) on Saturday, after being seen driving his Range Rover "erratically" near his club's ground in London's Fulham Road.

Mikel was not a member of the Chelsea team which beat Ipswich 3-1 at home in the FA Cup fourth round later Saturday.

He is due to appear at West London Magistrates' Court on April 3.

# \$330 million man

INTERNET, Barcelona



million to 330 it would cost to get the tal-

ented forward Lionel Messi away from Barcelona in accor-Barcelona have set 150 million for example. euros (195 million dollars) as his contract with his current the player. employer.

deter most of those who might tics bring up comparisons consider signing him. But, with Portugal's Cristiano fied. based on rumours of possible Ronaldo, of Manchester buyers in Madrid, there are United, the recent winner of some out there eying both the 330-million-dollar figure and their own bottom line.

However, other concepts Deportivo noted Monday.

Given these figures, Messi fee required to get Messi. is worth almost the equivalent million dollars.

Barcelona, the player - "not days of intense rumours. the club" - would have to pay the required money, so he were shocked by the chance should first get it from his that former Real Madrid coach

by showing he remains fully

committed to Manchester

threw his future into doubt by

leaving the English Premier

League club's training camp

in Tenerife without permis-

sion last week.

Mark Hughes.

The Brazil international

Robinho, 25, insists he

But the City manager

returned to South America to

deal with private family mat-

ters with the full blessing of

sanctioning a fine believed to

be worth two weeks' wages -

move on after the British

record 32.5 million pounds

attacking midfielder returned

to training ahead of

Wednesday's league match at

for his part in the embarrass-

ing misunderstanding as both

Robinho is keen to atone

home to Newcastle United.

around 280,000 pounds.

AFP, Manchester

he gets those funds, however, Some 254 Spanish tax authorities would demand that the striker pay euros, close income tax on them.

Messi could only avoid that million payment "if both clubs came dollars: to an agreement to issue a bill that is what for the amount of the contract-cancellation fee," which Real Madrid and Barcelona did in the past when Luis Figo dance with Spanish law. moved to the Spanish capital,

Technically, this would the fee - required by Spanish make the move a direct sale legislation - for the young between clubs, for the same Argentine to unilaterally break amount set as a penalty fee for back door.

Beyond tax issues, Messi's The figure is high enough to play, goals and general statisthe Ballon d'Or that distinguishes the best player in the

should be added to that alleged deal with Real Madrid amount. VAT would be that would take Ronaldo to required, as well as an income Spain next season for just over tax of 46 per cent, the 120 million euros (155.6 mil-Barcelona sports daily Mundo lion dollars). The amount is considerably lower than the

of Barcelona's whole annual shone again Saturday. When team budget, worth some 390 he scored in Barcelona's 4-1 win over Numancia, Messi Should any club try to kissed the club badge on his tempt Messi without coming shirt, in a gesture that seemed to an agreement with highly symbolic following

Barcelona-based media

Robinho fully committed

clubs get back to league action

City's 12-goal top scorer

Hughes added: "Robinho

The former Real Madrid

after an 11-day break follow-

this season insisted: "I'm

ready to give my all against

understands we needed to

address this and make my

feelings clear, and we've

player will line up alongside 30

million pounds' of new talent

with Nigel de Jong and Craig

Bellamy set to make their

debuts following their respec-

tive January arrivals from

German club SV Hamburg and

classed in the same stellar

bracket as Kaka, the Brazilian

record 102 million pounds bid

you could say okay, you can

build a team around him, but

I'm just a member of the

squad and I'll try to be a part of

a good team and play the best I

can," de Jong said.

for the AC Milan midfielder.

international City missed out

West Ham United.

Robinho is ing last weekend's FA Cup

moved on.

determined matches.

behind him Newcastle."

clearly felt differently after insists he should not be

Both parties are keen to on after launching a world

to put a

few days

potential new employer. Once Florentino Perez - a candidate to return to the club leadership in the coming months - might want to turn Messi into his greatest electoral asset. And the

> snowball started to roll. Barcelona fans do not forget the way Figo signed for Real Madrid in 2000, lifting Perez to the presidency. They also recall how their club has traditionally devoured superstars: one by one, talented players like Diego Armando Maradona, Bernd Schuster, Ronaldo, Figo or, most recently, Ronaldinho have left Barcelona through the

> Messi was quick to calm down fears. First, he kissed the club badge, and then he made it clear that he was very satis-

"I am missing nothing here, I have everything. Like the love of the fans, which is the most important thing, that which impresses me the most, I do There are reports of an not need to change teams," he

> And yet, late Sunday he made it clear that things may yet change. Could he leave?

"Nothing is impossible, because after everything that Ronaldinho gave Barcelona, The young Argentine he ended up being badly treated and he wound up leaving," the Argentine noted.

In the meantime, Messi's price continues to rise, and Barcelona is looking into ways to keep its superstar happy. However, given his market price, it is easy to predict that he will remain at his current club for as long as he wants to.

Hughes still hasn't given up

hope of landing Blackburn's

20 million pounds-rated

Paraguay forward Roque

Santa Cruz in what promises

to be a busy final week of the

(northern) winter transfer

Ireland goalkeeper Shay Given

is also nearing an eight million

pounds move to Eastlands

before the February 2 dead-

line, meaning the unsettled

32-year-old is unlikely to

spending has been rather

more modest than that of City

counterpart Hughes, although

the Newcastle manager is

closing in on 3.5 million

defender Albin Ebondo, while

also launching a bid to sign

Celtic captain Stephen

Danish international who has

joined Newcastle on a short-

the season, is in line to make

his debut, despite enjoying

less than 10 minutes of first

team action this season fol-

Peter Lovenkrands, the

Joe Kinnear's January

figure on Wednesday.

Newcastle's Republic of

window.

Dutch midfielder de Jong pounds-rated Toulouse

"If Kaka was sitting here term contract until the end of

McManus.

## Brazil recall Ronaldinho

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Former European footballer of the year Ronaldinho was on Monday recalled to Brazil's squad by coach Carlos Dunga for a friendly international against Italy in London next month.

The 28-year-old striker, also the FIFA World Player of the Year in both 2004 and 2005, is part of a Europebased squad also including his AC Milan teammates, midfielder Kaka, striker Alexandre Pato and defender Thiago Silva.

Manchester City's Robinho and Inter Milan's Adriano are also in the squad, adding to Dunga's attacking options for the fixture at Arsenal's Emirates stadium on February 10.

Dunga called up 25-yearold Fiorentina midfielder Felipe Melo for the first time after praising the player in recent performances.

Manchester United midfielder Anderson was also on Dunga's list although just three days ago it was announced he would be out for three weeks with an ankle injury after being stretchered off in the League Cup semifinal win over Derby on January 20.

Brazil team for friendly against Italy on February 10.

Goalkeepers: Julio Cesar (Inter Milan/ITA), Doni (AS Roma/ITA) Defenders: Maicon (Inter Milan/ITA), Daniel Alves (Barce-Iona/ESP), Lucio (Bayern Munich/GER), Juan (AS Roma/ITA), Thiago Silva (AC Milan/ITA), Luisao (Benfica/POR), Marcelo (Real Madrid/ESP) Adriano Correia (Sevilla/ESP) Midfielders: Gilberto Silva

(Panathinaikos/GRE), Josue (Wolfsburg/GER), Anderson (Manchester United/ENG), Felipe Melo (Fiorentina/ITA), Elano (Manchester City/ENG), Julio Baptista (AS Roma/ITA) Ronaldinho (AC Milan/ITA), Kaka (AC Milan/ITA)

Strikers: Alexandre Pato (AC Milan/ITA), Luis Fabiano (Sevilla/ESP), Adriano (Inter Milan/ITA), Robinho (Manchester City/ENG)

### West Ham sign German starlet

AFP, Paris

English Premiership club West Ham have signed Ugandan-born Germany Under-20 forward Savio Nsereko from Italian second division side Brescia.

The 19-year-old has agreed a four-and-a-half year deal with the Hammers after the two clubs agreed an undisclosed fee. Nsereko then passed a

medical and, subject to international clearance, will make his debut in the Premier League clash against Hull at Upton Park on Wednesday. West Ham chief executive

delighted to sign Savio, particularly with the fierce competition for his services across Europe. "He is an exciting prospect,

who Gianfranco Zola believes will prove a valuable asset for this club now and in the years to come. "It is a significant invest-

ment and shows our determi nation to continue moving this club forward."

# Chimbonda

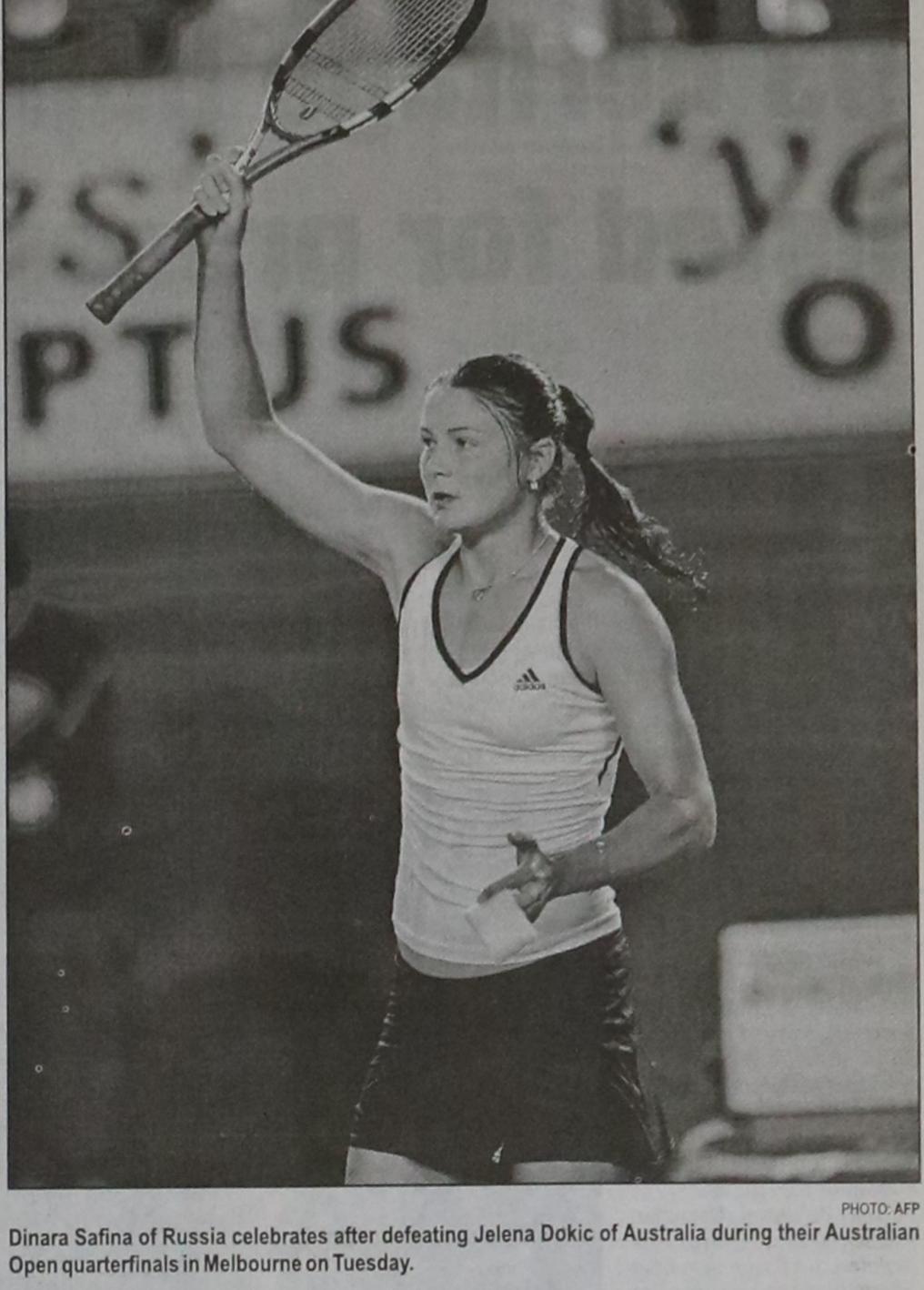
AFP, London

Tottenham Hotspur resigned Pascal Chimbonda from Premier League rivals Sunderland on Monday. Chimbonda left White Hart

Lane before this season began but didn't settle with the north-east side and will now provide Spurs manager Harry Redknapp with an additional option across several defensive positions. "I've signed him and he's

coming here," Redknapp

"The deal should have been done in the morning but it's over-run the deadline for him to play against Stoke. It was done 15 minutes too late which was disappointing. Otherwise he would have been availbeheld at the end of the season. able.



## Safina ends Dokic run

AFP, Melbourne

Russian third seed Dinara Safina said she needed all her new-found mental toughness to shut down tenacious Australian wildcard Jelena Dokic and reach the final four at Melbourne Park Tuesday.

Safina dug deep to set up a semifinal with seventh seeded compatriot Vera Zvonareva despite an errorridden display before a fiercely parochial crowd cheering on their local hero. The 23-year-old eventu-

ally ended the Australian's dream run 6-4, 4-6, 6-4 over a fiercely contested two hours 17 minutes. Safina made a good start

against Dokic, a former world number four now ranked 187 as she makes her comeback to Grand Slam tennis.

But the mental fragility that once marred her game emerged as the match wore on and she struggled to contain her emotions, smashing her racquet into the court

when Dokic took the second that had fervently hoped for set to force a decider.

enemy on the court. against myself playing,'

Safina said. "I play against me, my shadow, myself, everything against me. If one day I play only against my opponent, this will be the per-

fect day." The world number three chances to close down the match in the second set, committing eight double faults and converting only two of her 13 break point today." opportunities.

coaching from the sidelines as Dokic harried her in the decider, later revealing the importance she places on advice from coach Zeljko Krajan, who she credits with adding mental steel to her game.

"It's my coach, he's the only one person allowed to tell me something and nobody else," she said.

After finally edging out the Australian, she told the crowd

the local player's fairytale run She admitted she was to continue that there were sometimes her own worst no hard feelings.

"I am sorry that today I had "Most of the time it's me to defeat your Australian," she sold the packed Rod Laver Arena. "I hope that you will be behind me next time." Safina said she would need

to improve against Zvonareva, who has been in ominous form at this year's tournament.

"She's playing very good, squandered numerous I'll have to take the time off her and take the balls much earlier," Safina said. "I'll definitely have to be much more aggressive than

Dokic was philosophical She was cautioned about after the defeat, saying she had proved she could again match it with the best in the world.

"I played three sets with the number three player in the world, so everything is positive," the 25-year-old said.

"I've had a great tournament. It's a little bit disappointing, I had some chances. But sometimes things go your way and sometimes they don't.

## West Ham chief executive Scott Duxbury told the club's official website: "We are Rivals hope to exploit

AFP, Rome



Juventus will be hoping the recent controversy at title rivals Inter will distract the leaders enough that they drop points during

AC Milan and

Wednesday's full Serie A programme. Inter lead Juve by three points with Milan a further three points back but the pressure has been mounting

on Jose Mourinho's team

since the turn of the year. They have been anything but convincing in the league, drawing at home to Cagliari and losing embarrassingly 3-1 at Atalanta before scraping a narrow 1-0 home success

over Sampdoria. That victory came at a cost, though, as Mourinho copped a one match touchline ban and in-form forward Adriano was hit with a threematch ban for punching Daniele Gastaldello in the

They've picked up three points fewer than each of their title rivals since the New Year and Mourinho has shown signs of getting rattled.

He has already developed a difficult relationship with Italian journalists who seem eager to provoke him and see

him fail.

Following the Atalanta defeat he was asked about Inter's current 'crisis', to which he reacted defiantly, claiming every other team in the league would swap their position for Inter's.

But the constant criticisms seem to be getting to him as he got angered when discussing refereeing decisions following the Sampdoria victory after he was asked about an apparent foul by Inter defender Ivan Cordoba on Giampaolo Pazzini that went unpunished.

Across the city, his counterpart at Milan, Carlo Ancelotti, is feeling relaxed and confident.

"It's turning into a great battle between us, Juve and Inter," he said. "Each team

has different strengths. "Inter are based around strength, Juve on teamwork and enthusiasm and Milan on

quality.

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

"Whoever is in the best shape in the spring when the Champions League starts up again should win." One of the reasons

Ancelotti is feeling so good

has been the impact David Beckham has had on the team since joining on loan from LA Galaxy. Beckham scored his first goal in a Milan shirt in Sunday's 4-1 win at Bologna

and has otherwise been unspectacular but his contribution has helped make Milan a better team. Milan host Genoa looking to gain revenge for the 2-0 defeat they suffered in their second game of the season, a

result that has helped Genoa challenge for a top four fin-They currently hold fourth place but AS Roma, who host Palermo, are charging up behind them on the back of a

10 game spell in which they won eight times. Juventus have what would on paper seem a difficult match away to Udinese but the northerners have not won

since October, when they

topped the league. Since then they have lost eight and drawn three of their 11 matches, including home defeats to the bottom two, Reggina and Chievo.



## Fans want Perez back INTERNET, Madrid



and members of Real Madrid are keen for

return as club president, according to polls in the news media. According to the Marca sports daily - its poll results splashed on Tuesday's front page - Perez would get the support of no less than 62.9 per cent of club members, if the elections were held now.

No other potential candidate comes close to Perez, according to Marca. 1980s Real and Spain

defender Manuel Sanchis would get 15.1 per cent if he stood, Juan Palacios - who narrowly lost to Ramon Calderon in 2006 - would get 7.1 per cent, Juan Miguel Villar

Mir 3.2 per cent, Eugenio Martinez Bravo 2.4 per cent Most fans and former Telefonica president Juan Villalonga just 1.4 percent. Perez, 61, has still not

announced if he will stand, though these online polls will probably encourage him to do so.

It has already been rumoured that he would bring back Zinedine Zidane - one of his "Galactico" signings during his previous reign -as either sporting director or 'global ambassador." Perez, one of Spain's most

nates, narrowly lost the 1995 Real elections to incumbent Ramon Calderon. Five years later, however, he defeated Lorenzo Sanz - Mendoza's chosen successor - largely by "stealing" Luis Figo from historic rivals Barcelona.

important construction mag-

Vicente Boluda, who has announced that elections will His six-year reign, from 2000 to 2006, is fondly recalled today

lowing his release by the German club Schalke.

by Real fans nostalgic about the

"Galacticos" that he brought to

wake of Figo in 2001, Ronaldo

in 2002, David Beckham in

2003 and Michael Owen in

2004. Under Perez' high-

profile rule, Real won two

Spanish leagues (2001 and

2003) and one Champions

wrong towards the end of his

reign and he abruptly resigned

in February 2006, confessing

that he had "spoiled" the

president on January 16 after

Marca had revealed a vote-

rigging scandal at the

December 7 annual general

presidency to close friend

Calderon passed on the

Calderon quit as club

However, things went

Zidane followed in the

the Estadio Bernabeu.

League (2002).

"Galactico" stars.

assembly.