

EPL concerns Blatter

AFP, London

FIFA president Sepp Blatter believes the dominance of the Premier League's big four - Manchester United, Liverpool, Chelsea and Arsenal - is proving unhealthy for competition.

Since the formation of the Premier League in 1992, there have only been four different winners and Blatter is concerned that the priority of most teams is merely to avoid costly relegation.

"In a competition where two-thirds or three-quarters of the participants in the league play not to be first, but not to be relegated, there is something wrong," Blatter told the BBC.

The FIFA chief added that the global power and appeal of the English Premier League is damaging the sport worldwide.

"I have my concerns because the Premier League is the strongest in the world definitely," he said.

"It is taking over in such a manner that the other leagues have difficulties to match it."

Taylor escapes extra sanction

AFP, London

Newcastle's Steven Taylor will not face any further disciplinary punishment after being booked during the 2-1 loss to Premier League leaders Manchester United on Wednesday, the FA have announced.

Taylor appeared to foul Cristiano Ronaldo in the first-half before following up with another strong challenge on Michael Carrick.

However, referee Steve Bennett told the Football Association here Thursday that Taylor's yellow card was for the foul on Carrick.

After watching video footage, Bennett said he would have booked Taylor for the Ronaldo challenge as well.

That in turn would have led to the England Under-21 captain being sent-off for two bookable offences.

However, under the rules of world football governing body FIFA, the FA cannot change punishments that would have involved two yellow cards as opposed to a single red.

The FA have also decided not to investigate further reports of a verbal half-time spat in the St James' Park tunnel between Taylor and United striker Wayne Rooney, saying the incident was not serious enough to warrant action.

Mourinho jibes irk Maldini

SOCCERNET

AC Milan defender Paolo Maldini has responded angrily to Inter Milan boss Jose Mourinho's claims that the Rossoneri will win nothing this season.

The veteran defender is eager to remind the Inter coach that he is yet to win a single Scudetto, when Maldini already has five.

The comment came as a response to a swipe from the Portuguese, who has made enemies of many Serie A managers including Luciano Spalletti of Roma, Claudio Ranieri of Juventus and Milan's Carlo Ancelotti.

"It doesn't matter that Milan have so many players with a winning mentality, this season they will finish with no trophies," Mourinho said after the Coppa Italia clash with Sampdoria.

"And Juventus only find themselves in such a good position due to refereeing errors."

Maldini rarely shies away from the media spotlight and replied: "I don't want to trade insults with Mourinho, but he really can't make these claims until he wins something for Inter himself."

"As far as I know, he is discussing something which he has a chance of winning, but which I have already won five times."

Yet Maldini's final season for the Rossoneri before retiring does look set to end without any silverware.

The 40-year-old defender's team were eliminated from the UEFA Cup by Werder Bremen and the club are 12 points behind Mourinho's men in the Serie A table.

Becks on the brink

Football

AFP, Rome

AC Milan vice president Adriano Galliani denied on Friday that a deal had been agreed with Los Angeles Galaxy to sign David Beckham but said he was feeling 'optimistic'.

Earlier in the day a Milan press spokesman told AFP that no comment would be made from the club until an announcement is posted on Milan's official website.

But speaking outside a Football League meeting the Milan number two said a deal was close to being agreed.

"There's no news but I'm a little more optimistic because we're making progress and with a little correction here and there to the documents things are going forwards between us and Galaxy," he said.

"It has to be official yet but we're on the right path. There are no storms brewing."

Galliani more or less confirmed a deal would be done although he said he couldn't be sure when exactly.

"The decisive day could be today (Friday), tomorrow or Monday but the most important thing is that David is here and is playing in the Milan jersey," he said.

Earlier in the day English press reports claimed a deal had been struck to keep the former England captain at the San Siro until the end of the season.

Under a unique 'timeshare' agreement the England midfielder would then return

to Galaxy from July to October before returning to Milan in November for the rest of next season.

Beckham's determination to stay at Milan is so great that he will allegedly fund part of the deal himself.

A spokesman for Beckham declined to comment. The deal follows weeks of negotiations between the two clubs during which Milan balked at the size of transfer fee demanded by Galaxy -- thought to be around 12 million euros.

Milan reportedly were only willing to pay three million dollars. Beckham initially joined

Milan on loan in January until this weekend and was due to head back to the United States on Monday, following Milan's home clash with Atalanta on Sunday.

However, the 33-year-old, who arranged the loan deal in order to keep active during the long Major League Soccer off season so he could remain in England manager Fabio Capello's World Cup plans, quickly made it clear he didn't want to go back to Los Angeles.

Milan too were keen to keep hold of the former Manchester United and Real Madrid star who immediately became a first-team fixture.

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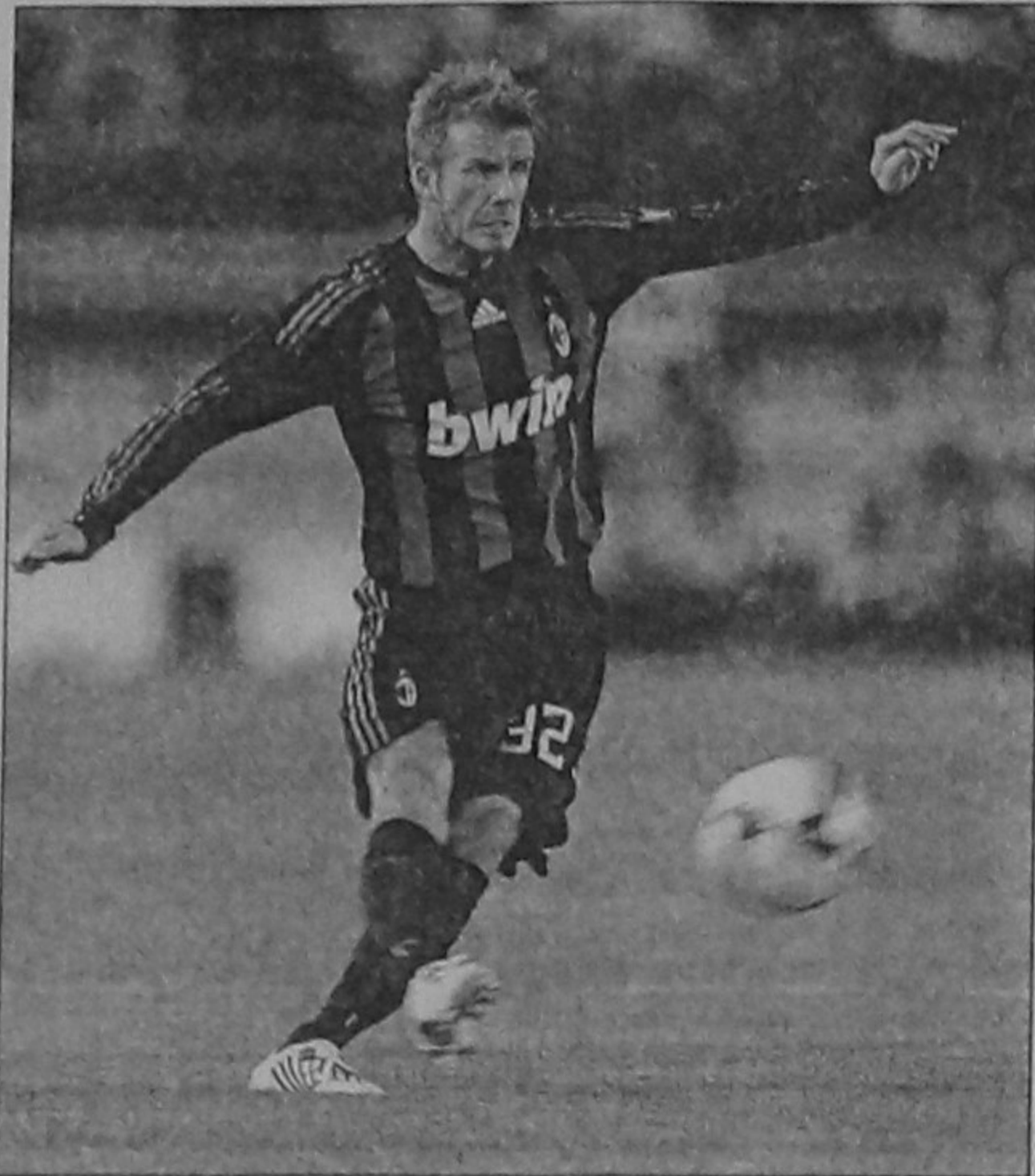
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Ronaldo feels incredible

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazilian World Cup winner Ronaldo, who was sidelined for over a year because of a crippling knee injury, said it was an 'incredible feeling' to be back.

"To be back on the pitch produced a great feeling. It really is a fantastic emotion," said Ronaldo who came on as a substitute for Corinthians, his ninth club, on Wednesday.

His 67th-minute appearance in the 2-0 Brazil Cup victory over Itumbiara ended a 387-day period on the sidelines following a rupture to his left knee while playing for AC Milan.

"I have suffered a lot in the last year being away from the pitch," Ronaldo told TV Globo.

"This is only the start. I have a lot to do to get better. There's another game on Sunday. I can't play every match but I will try and play as much as I can."

'English aren't English'

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Marcello Lippi has dismissed notions of a battle between English and Italian teams in the Champions League this season by claiming that the Premier League sides aren't 'actually English'.

The Italy coach, who guided the Azzurri to World Cup glory in Berlin three years ago, told a foreign press meeting that he believes the Italian teams can progress in the Champions League against their 'international' opponents.

Juventus and AS Roma lost 1-0 away in their round of 16 first legs against Chelsea and Arsenal respectively while Inter Milan were held 0-0 at home by Manchester United.

Those results have cast a shadow over Italian football with many in the game convinced Serie A representatives will fall to English opposition for the second year in a row.

But Lippi hit out at the make-up of the Premier League sides.

"Chelsea, Manchester (United) and Arsenal, like Liverpool, don't represent English football," said Lippi.

"But instead, like in other countries, that of globalised football where the owners, coaches and the majority of players are not English."

"The true clash between the two (English and Italian) is only between the national teams."

Of the four English clubs in the Champions League only Arsenal are not foreign-owned; none of the four have an English manager.

Arsenal rarely field an Englishman from the start while Liverpool only really use Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher with any regularity.

Chelsea usually start with three Englishmen in John Terry, Frank Lampard and Ashley Cole although Joe Cole would also probably play regularly if fit.

Even European champions Manchester United have a less English feel to them this season.

Only four Englishmen in Wayne Rooney, Paul Scholes, Rio Ferdinand and Michael Carrick are part of the regular first team picture.

However, injuries have prevented Owen Hargreaves, Gary Neville and Wes Brown from playing more often while there is still much more of a British feel to United than their rivals.

Manager Sir Alex Ferguson is Scottish as is midfielder Darren Fletcher while Ryan Giggs represents Wales, Jonny Evans plays for Northern Ireland and John O'Shea for the Republic of Ireland.

Bit-part players Ben Foster, Danny Welbeck and Adam Eckersley are English while Darron Gibson was born in Northern Ireland, but represents the Republic in international football.

In Sunday's League Cup final, United began the match with four Englishmen, two Irishmen and a Northern Irishman while Giggs came off the bench.

However in Wednesday's 2-1 Premier League win at Newcastle, they started with just three Englishmen, a Scot and an Irishman.

It's heating up

AFP, Madrid

It looked like a question of when, rather than if, Barcelona were going to win this season's Spanish league championship but they have lost their way late with one point from the last nine.

There is now a genuine title race with Real Madrid.

Barcelona held a substantial 12-point gap over Real back on February 15 but that lead has shrunk to just four points in the space of three games with Barcelona drawing against Real Betis before defeats to Espanyol and Atletico Madrid.

Real have rattled out ten straight wins to play their part and hope to continue their pursuit of Barcelona on Saturday with a derby win over Atletico at the Santiago Bernabeu.

"We are four points behind the leaders now and people seem to think our work is over, but this has only just begun," said Real coach Juande Ramos. "Those people who think we'll easily catch up with Barcelona are wrong. This is going to be very long."

Barcelona's dip in form has been attributed to playing too many games as they fight on three fronts and they were in action in midweek reaching the Spanish Cup final with a 3-

1 aggregate win over Real Mallorca.

Barcelona will face Athletic Bilbao in the final and ironically the two finalists meet at Camp Nou on Saturday.

Atletico came from 2-0 down to beat Barca 4-3 last weekend and hope to follow that up with victory over Real to enhance their Champions League hopes with fourth-placed Villarreal three points ahead.

Atletico have not beaten neighbours Real since 1999 and new coach Abel Resino will hope he is the man to break that jinx.

"This time we are going to do Barcelona a favour," said Atletico captain Maxi Rodriguez.

Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas has watched his side close the gap on Barca but said he would rather be in their shoes at the top of the table.

"It was to be expected that Barca wouldn't win a few matches and something like

FIXTURES

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

that could happen to us too," explained Casillas. "I would swap places with them as they are still in three competitions and four points ahead in the league."

Real have a tough week with Atletico and then Tuesday's Champions League match at Liverpool trailing 1-0 from the first leg.

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola is under the microscope after his team's loss of form but remains convinced Barcelona will be crowned champions come May.

"I sense we'll be champions," said Guardiola. "I always say what I feel and right now I feel like we will start winning again and gain more of an advantage. We just need to get back the shape and aggression we were showing at the start of the season."

Bilbao thrashed Sevilla 3-0 to reach the Spanish Cup final after a 24-year wait so will go to Barcelona on a high.

Sevilla entertain Almeria on Sunday aiming to bounce back from their cup setback and continue their strong league form that has left them third.

Last season's cup winners Valencia are in freefall and need to get back on the winning trail after collecting just six points from their last eight games.

Valencia, three points off the Champions League spots, travel to bottom side Numancia on Sunday.

Honda sells to Brawn

INTERNET, undated



The Honda Motor company has sold its Formula One racing team to former manager Ross Brawn, Japan's second largest carmaker announced Friday in Tokyo.

The new team will be known as Brawn GP and has already confirmed Jensen Button and Rubens Barrichello as its driver line-up for the 2009 season, which gets under way with the Australian Grand Prix on March 29 in Melbourne.

"The vast experience and knowledge that both drivers bring to our team will prove invaluable as we aim to get up to speed in the shortest possible time to be ready for the first race of the season," said Brawn.

Brawn GP has also agreed a partnership with Mercedes-Benz High Performance Engines in the UK to supply the team with its 2.4 litre Mercedes-Benz FO108W Formula One engines.

Honda pulled out of F1 in December, citing the global economic crisis. Since then the Brackley, England-based Honda Racing F1

Team (HRF1) team has fought for its survival.

"The entire shares of the HRF1, held by Honda GP Holdings Ltd, the UK-based holding company for HRF1 that managed all operations of Honda's Formula One racing, were sold to Ross Brawn," a company statement said.

Brawn said the last months had been extremely difficult for the team but that the announcement was "the very pleasing conclusion to the strenuous efforts that have been made to secure its future."

Hiroshi Oshima, Honda's motor sports managing officer, said that since Honda's exit from F1 in December they "conducted various studies and discussions so that the team can continue its activities as a new team."

"We are pleased that we could sell the team to Ross Brawn," Oshima said.

Japan's number two carmaker after Toyota expects profits to drop to 80 billion yen (807 million dollars) in the fiscal year ending March 31.

Brawn GP will now take part in the remaining pre-season tests, in Barcelona (March 9-12) and Jerez (March 15-17) prior to the opening GP of the season in Melbourne.

Lead role inspires Javier

Football

INTERNET, undated

Responsibility appears to be Javier Mascherano's key motivating element, and commitment his main tool on and off the pitch as the midfielder looks ahead optimistically to a new era for the Argentine national team, under new coach Diego Maradona.

"The national team captaincy is a beautiful challenge. The fact that Maradona thought of me represents an unforgettable pride in my career," the Liverpool midfielder told Deutsche Presse-Agentur dpa.

Argentina are set to make their official debut under national football legend Maradona on March 28 against Venezuela in Buenos Aires, in a South American qualifier for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

However, the Maradona era has already started, and it did so on a winning note. Scotland and the more prestigious France fell victims to an Argentina side that still showed some tactical mistakes, alongside a radical change of character as compared to the end of the reign of former coach Alfio Basile.

"The next two games are the most important of what lies ahead of us in the qualifiers. We are very excited about being able to finally start playing for points, and the games against Venezuela and Bolivia are set to be a major measurement of where we stand. We have a lot of confidence."

Argentina's irregular performances in the most recent qualifiers appear to have been left behind.

"We are convinced that we can qualify for the World Cup. We are going to fight very hard to be able to make it and we have a good enough team to be able to get among the top teams in the table. If we have confidence in our game, we will be able to achieve our goal."

"In any case, these quali-

ers are showing that everyone is wrong when they say that Brazil and Argentina simply qualify. Paraguay are playing a spectacular tournament, and Chile showed great play in many matches."

Mascherano is glad to see that new ground rules have been laid with regard to attitude and that the new group is obsessed with winning every game.

"I think the most outstanding thing since Diego arrived is the change in the team's mentality. We want to go out and eat up our rivals. He prepares us for every game as if we were about to play the world Cup final, and that is very positive for players."

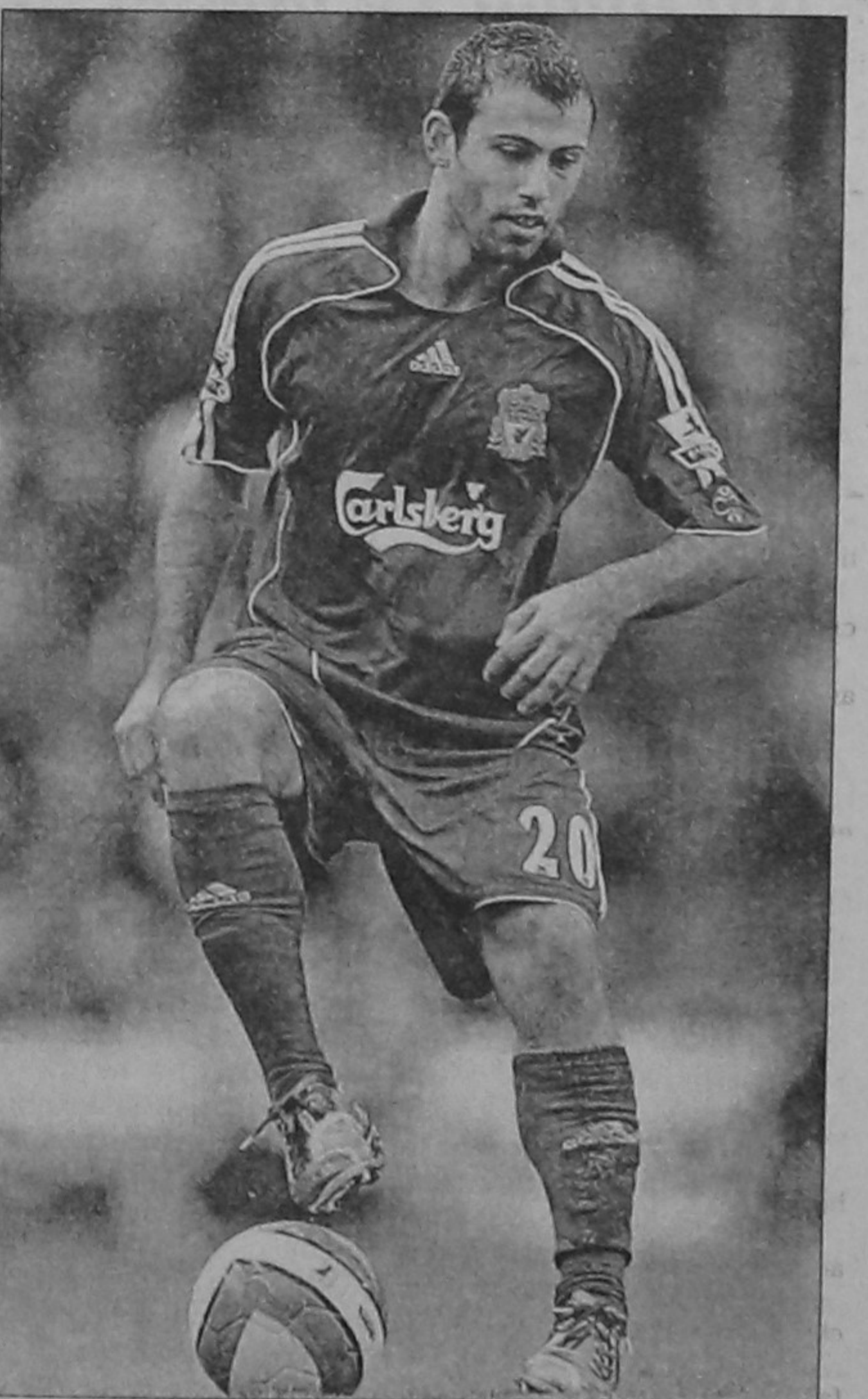
Since Maradona took over as coach, the midfield pairing of Mascherano and Real

Madrid's Fernando Gago has surprised many.

"I feel very comfortable playing with Fernando. I think we complement each other well in most situations of play, and although we have to improve some aspects, we enjoy ourselves very much when we are on the pitch together. Besides, we have a good relationship off the pitch, which is very important."

As the formal start of Maradona's time as national team coach approaches, so does the captaincy of one of the symbols of the Argentine squad.

"Playing for Argentina is something unique and it will always make me happy. That is never going to change," Mascherano stressed.



JAVIER MASCHERANO

Crucial week for Inter

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan, with their Champions League and Italian Cup hopes hanging by the thinnest of threads, are feeling the heat as their season enters a potentially decisive week.

Jose Mourinho's team have a seven-point lead over second-placed Juventus in Serie A, but go to Manchester United in midweek for the second leg of their last 16 Champions League tie having been held 0-0 at the San Siro.

On Wednesday, they slumped to an embarrassing 3-0 defeat to Sampdoria in the first leg of their Coppa Italia semifinal.

Mourinho has become clearly rattled.

The Portuguese coach was irritated at having to answer questions about the dubious penalty his team were awarded last weekend in the 3-3 draw against AS Roma and then because a much-changed Inter were humbled at Sampdoria.

While Inter are still expected to romp away to a fourth straight title, defeat to Manchester United on Wednesday would see the club fail in their primary aim for the season.

Bayern struggling

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich's mounting problems with Jurgen Klinsmann's job in danger, doubts over Franck Ribery staying and their lacklustre start to the year have come into focus as they host Hanover on Saturday.

Wednesday's 4-2 German Cup elimination by Bayer Leverkusen has yet further dampened their confidence as they lie fifth in the league, four points behind leaders Hertha Berlin.