

## Fergie salutes C'Ron

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson saluted Cristiano Ronaldo after the Manchester United winger's two-goal blast against Arsenal in Tuesday's Champions League semifinal sent the holders back to the final with a 3-1 win on the night and 4-1 on aggregate.

Ronaldo was at his formidable best at the Emirates Stadium as the Portugal winger set up United's opener for Park Ji-Sung and then embarrassed Arsenal keeper Manuel Almunia with a blistering free-kick.

Not content with that, Ronaldo started and finished the move of the match in the 61st minute to put the result beyond doubt and seal United's place in the final against Chelsea or Barcelona.

"I thought they couldn't handle Ronaldo. That made a big difference," Ferguson said.

"The midfield was working its socks off, we had good shape and the defensive positions were covered but we needed someone to give them real problems and Ronaldo in that form, he's a fantastic player.

"We weren't overcome by Arsenal's start to the game - they were moving and the crowd were going but we kept playing our football. Once we transferred the ball to Ronaldo, it was a big problem for them.

"We got a good start and that made the difference. Two quick goals like that against a young team, I don't think, wherever you play, you can recover from that. It was a mountain to climb, especially as it was 1-0 from the first game.

"The third goal was marvellous. At that point, Arsenal were throwing everything forward and we caught them really. The speed of the play was fantastic."

The only dark cloud over United's triumph

was Darren Fletcher's late red card for a foul on Cesc Fabregas, which rules the Scotland midfielder out of the final.

Italian referee Roberto Rosetti awarded the penalty for Fletcher's challenge even though he appeared to take the ball first.

"He's disappointed and he should be. He's one of the most honest players in the game and to miss the final, it's a tragedy," Ferguson said.

"I haven't spoken to the referee. I respect him. He may look at it himself but we shouldn't ask him. He's confident enough and fair enough to look at it himself, possibly. We can't appeal and that's disappointing for the boy."

While Ferguson savoured a victory that added further lustre to an already glittering CV, Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger admitted his side's defeat was the most disappointing moment of his career.

"It's the most disappointing defeat. The fans were up for a big night and to disappoint people, it hurts really," Wenger said. "The most difficult thing for me is that we have the feeling that we never played in the semifinal."

"We started quite well but the most disappointing thing was that the game was over before it started. That is hard to swallow."

"We can only look at ourselves. It's very disappointing to fight such a long way and then to give the game away like we did."

"We don't blame individuals but it's like that. We conceded two in three minutes and that's too much against a side that defends well and which likes to counter attack."

Patrice Evra, United's France left-back, rubbed salt into Wenger's wounds as he claimed the tie had been a walkover.

"It was 11 men against 11 babies," Evra said. "If you look at their 11 players and our 11 we were better everywhere."

"We keep hearing that Arsenal play good football but that is not everything. You have to win titles, at Manchester we play good football and win titles."

## Arsenal fan commits suicide

AFP, Nairobi

An Arsenal fan in football-mad Kenya hanged himself following his team's 4-1 aggregate drubbing by arch-rivals Manchester United in the Champions League semifinal, police said Wednesday.

Suleiman Alphonso Omondi, a 29-year-old Kenyan living in the capital Nairobi's Embakasi neighbourhood, hanged himself in his Arsenal shirt late Tuesday after the match, police said.

"We were watching the match at Bamba 70 pub, and when Arsenal was defeated, Suleiman just walked out in protest and he was crying," Calvin Otieno, one of his friends, told AFP.

"We didn't know he was going to hang himself until this morning when we received the reports and came here to find his body at the balcony," Otieno said outside the deceased's home.

Arsenal slumped to a 3-1 defeat at home in the second leg of the Champions League semifinal, capping a disappointing season for the Gunners who were already out of the Premier League title race early in the season.

Football-related domestic tragedies are frequent in the region, where English clubs enjoy passionate following and European games draw more attention than national and continental games.

## No reprieve for Fletcher

AFP, Nyon

UEFA on Wednesday ruled out a reprieve for Manchester United midfielder Darren Fletcher over the red card that means he will be suspended for the Champions League final.

Fletcher was sent off in United's 3-1 win over Arsenal on Tuesday for a challenge on Cesc Fabregas inside the penalty box. Television replays showed that the United player had played the ball before Fabregas tumbled over him.

But even if referee Roberto Rosetti accepts he made a mistake, UEFA's rules allow for red cards to be rescinded only if the official acknowledges that he punished the wrong player, a spokesman for European football's governing body confirmed.

"A club can file a protest against a caution or a sending off but under our rules it is only admissible if there is a case of mistaken identity by the referee," he said.

Although Scotland international Fletcher is not an automatic first-choice player for United, he has been a regular this season in the club's biggest matches and would almost certainly have featured in the final in Rome.

Fletcher was bitterly disappointed to be an unused substitute during last season's final win over Chelsea in Moscow and United boss Ferguson admitted he felt for his compatriot.

"Darren is disappointed and he should be disappointed," Ferguson said. "He's one of the most honest players in the game and to miss the final, it's a tragedy. He was distraught."

Fletcher was consoled after the match by Paul Scholes, who, along with Roy Keane, missed United's victory over Bayern Munich in the 1999 final because of suspension.

## Velappan says sorry

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Caffe-prone former top Asian Football Confederation official Peter Velappan was forced to apologise Wednesday after telling the AFC president to go home "to the desert."

The remark at a press conference, in which Velappan was critical of Qatari AFC chief Mohamed bin Hammam, drew the ire of Arab journalists, who condemned it as racist.

Velappan, who was the AFC's secretary-general for 30 years, was asked to retract the comment, with former AFC official Mohamed Awada leading the demands.

"I come from the desert and that is an insult to us," said Lebanon's Awada, the organisation's former press officer.

Velappan issued a statement of apology.

"I also want to express my most heartfelt regret to all member associations of the AFC as well," said the Malaysian, who has come out of retirement to drum up support for Bin Hammam's challenger, Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa.

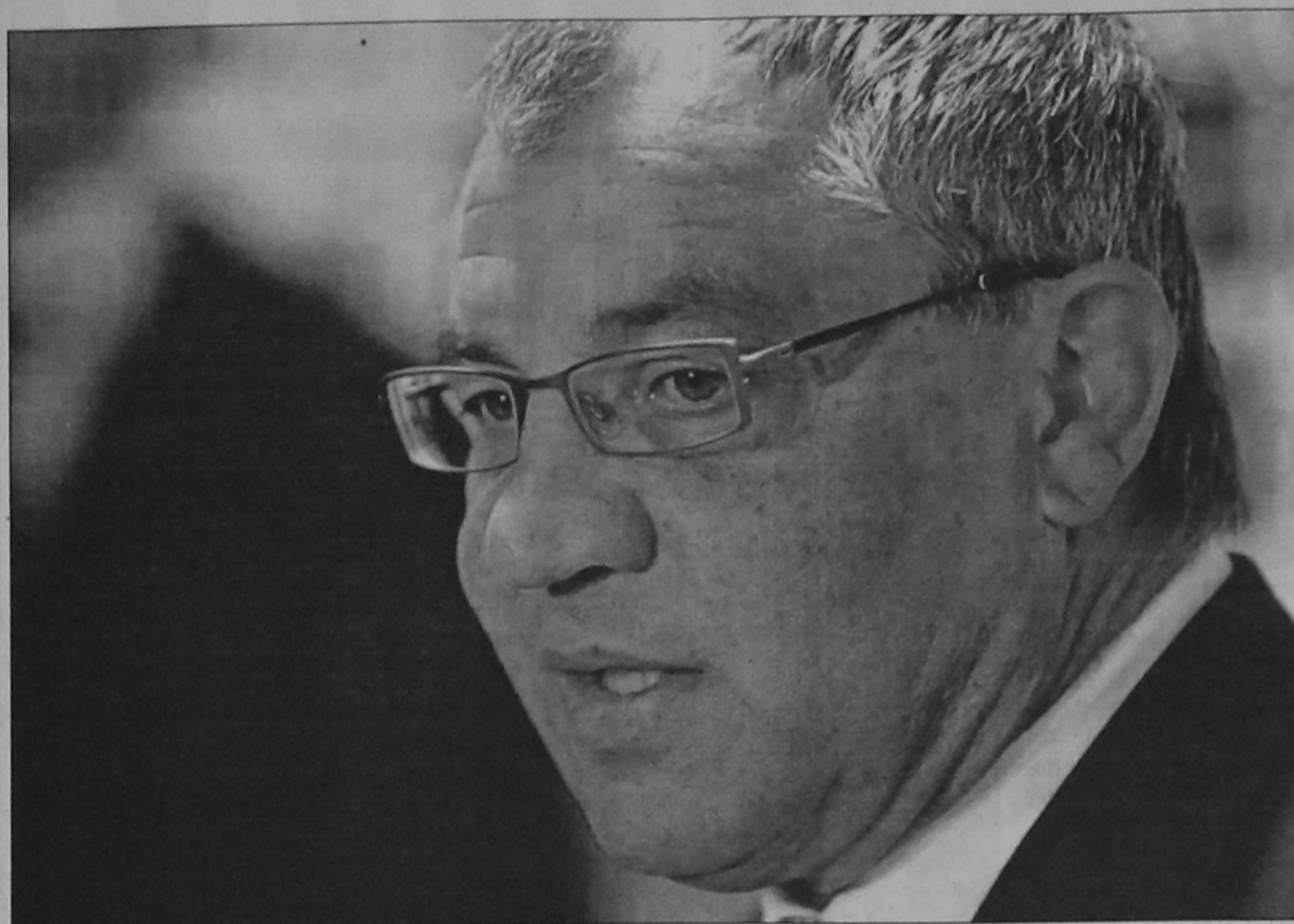


PHOTO: AFP

Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath addresses a press conference in Wolfsburg on Wednesday. Magath is leaving Wolfsburg for Schalke at the end of the season.

## Schalke unveil Magath

Football

AFP, Berlin

Felix Magath, coach of current Bundesliga leaders Wolfsburg, will join rivals Schalke 04 at the end of the season, he confirmed on Wednesday.

Wolfsburg announced Wednesday the 55-year-old will leave them when the season ends on May 23 and hours later Schalke confirmed Magath will take on the dual role of team manager and coach for them next season.

Neither the lure of taking Wolfsburg into the Champions League for the first time, nor leading them to their first Bundesliga title - imminent with his side three points clear with four games remaining - could tempt Magath to stay. And after speculation first flew around the German media last week, Magath admitted he was revealed to finally make his future plans known - albeit poorly timed with his current side chasing the league title.

"I am glad that the decision is finally out, even if I am not really happy about the circumstances," said Magath in a press conference in Wolfsburg on Wednesday having taken charge of the Bundesliga team in the summer of 2007.

"After discussions with Wolfsburg's supervisory board, we had already decided week ago I would leave, but I regret the timing."

Magath told the Wolfsburg squad on Wednesday morning and says he leaves with his head held high.

"I believe there are good reasons behind my decision," he said.

"From my point of view, the goals which I agreed on at the beginning of my commitment

with Wolfsburg's board have been reached.

"It was planned to take the team to a higher level and nobody thought we would achieve that within two years."

"I don't believe someone can work in professional football, on a long-term basis, based on promises."

"And I was fortunate to get a good start to my time here."

Former Bayern Munich coach Magath has a four-year contract at Schalke and says he leaves Wolfsburg in rude health having used the early exit clause in his contract to take charge at Schalke.

Magath will take over from both Dutch coach Fred Rutten and team manager Andreas Mueller who were sacked from their roles by Schalke earlier this year.

"We have already reached our sporting targets substantially faster than we planned in the summer of 2007 when I took charge," added Magath.

"This team is young and is bound to develop more in the future."

Magath has steered Wolfsburg to the top of the German league this season, while Schalke are up to seventh in the table after an indifferent season, and Hans-Dieter Poetsch, chairman of Wolfsburg's board, paid tribute to his work.

"We would like to offer our thanks to Mr Magath for his help over the last two years and for his extraordinary achievement in such a short period of time," he said.

Magath was sacked by Bayern in February 2007 despite leading them to the Bundesliga and German Cup double in both of the two seasons before, but has turned midtable Wolfsburg into table leaders.

## Hamburg hold slim lead

AFP, Berlin



Hamburg coach Martin Jol admits he is tempted to make sure his side practice penalties ahead of Thursday night's UEFA Cup semifinal.

second leg at home as they hold a slim 1-0 lead over Werder Bremen.

Germany winger Piotr Trochowski gave Hamburg a slight advantage from Bremen's Weserstadion last

Thursday and his away goal could well make the difference, but Jol wants to prepare his side in case of the dreaded penalties.

"Maybe I will have the lads practice penalties," said Jol ahead of the all-German derby.

"If I do, it will be behind closed doors in the stadium."

With a place at the final in the Istanbul final on May 20 up for grabs, Hamburg hope to have striker Mladen Petric back from a leg injury.

The Croatian forward trained amongst the reserve team players on Tuesday and a late fitness test will determine whether he plays in the HSH Nordbank Arena clash.

Peru striker Paolo Guerrero sustained a

bruised ankle during the 1-1 Bundesliga home draw against Hertha Berlin last Sunday and will sit out the game with a suspension after picking up a third booking in the first leg.

But Jol says the mood in the camp is positive with his side also battling for the Bundesliga title.

"Things are going well for us. We have reached the month of May and we have several crucial games ahead," said Jol.

"It doesn't get any better for a player. We prepare for games in exactly the same way as we have prepared for previous ones."

Bremen midfielder Mesut Ozil admits he is struggling to be fit in time after the German Under-21 star damaged his knee.

"I will fight to be able to start on Thursday against Hamburg," said Ozil.

"I am still not 100 per cent right, I still have pain in both knees, but it is getting better."

Ozil, Brazilian playmaker Diego, who has a back injury, and striker Hugo Almeida, with a sore heel, are struggling to be fit, but all three are hopeful, says Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf.

But Bremen will be without Daniel Jensen (Achilles' tendon inflammation), Jurica Vranjes (back problems) and Christian Vander (knee injury) will not travel to Hamburg.

## Van Basten steps down

AFP, The Hague

Marco van Basten has stood down as coach of Ajax after failing to guide the Dutch giants into next year's Champions League, the club announced Wednesday on its website.

The former star striker for the Dutch national side "had reached the conclusion that he had failed to achieve the goals he had set at the start of the season and that he would be unable to do any better next season," a club statement said.

The 44-year-old Van Basten took over at his former club last July after being Dutch national coach for four years, notably at the 2006 World Cup finals and Euro 2008.

The former European club champions are currently lying third in the Dutch first division behind unfashionable AZ Alkmaar and FC Twente and with just one game to go cannot grab one of the two spots available for next season's Champions League.

The final straw was a 4-0 defeat away at Sparta Rotterdam last weekend.

Their last game of the season on Sunday against FC Twente will see assistant coach John van't Schip in charge on an interim basis.

## 'Park will play final'

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson has hinted South Korea winger Park Ji-Sung will play in the Champions League final as a reward for his heroic display in Manchester United's semifinal win over Arsenal.

Ferguson is determined to give Park his moment in the spotlight because he believes the 28-year-old is one of his most under-rated players.

Park emphasised his value to United with a typically energetic and effective performance at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday.

He gave United the perfect start with an alert finish after Kieran Gibbs slipped while trying to clear Cristiano Ronaldo's cross.

Then he played a key role in United's third goal with a sweeping cross-field pass to Wayne Rooney, who centred for Ronaldo to score.

Park, who also scored in Saturday's win at Middlesbrough, suffered the worst moment of his career last season when Ferguson could not even find him a place on the

bench for the Champions League final victory over Chelsea in Moscow.

But, speaking after United's 4-1 aggregate victory over Arsenal, Ferguson revealed that the former PSV Eindhoven star is set to get his wish to play in Europe's showpiece final in Rome's Stadio Olimpico.

"He's one of the most under-rated players," Ferguson said. "He came back from South Korea tired last month but we gave him a break for two weeks. He's refreshed and you saw the results of that against Arsenal."

"If you watch the game again, you will see the running of Park and Darren Fletcher. They were star men."

"Park never stopped running and his movement and use of space was very good. I don't think he'll be disappointed (in the final) this time."

Fletcher, though, will play no part - a substitute in the last final though he didn't get on the pitch - as he was sent-off and despite not seemingly touching Cesc Fabregas in the penalty area there is no recourse for an appeal under UEFA rules.

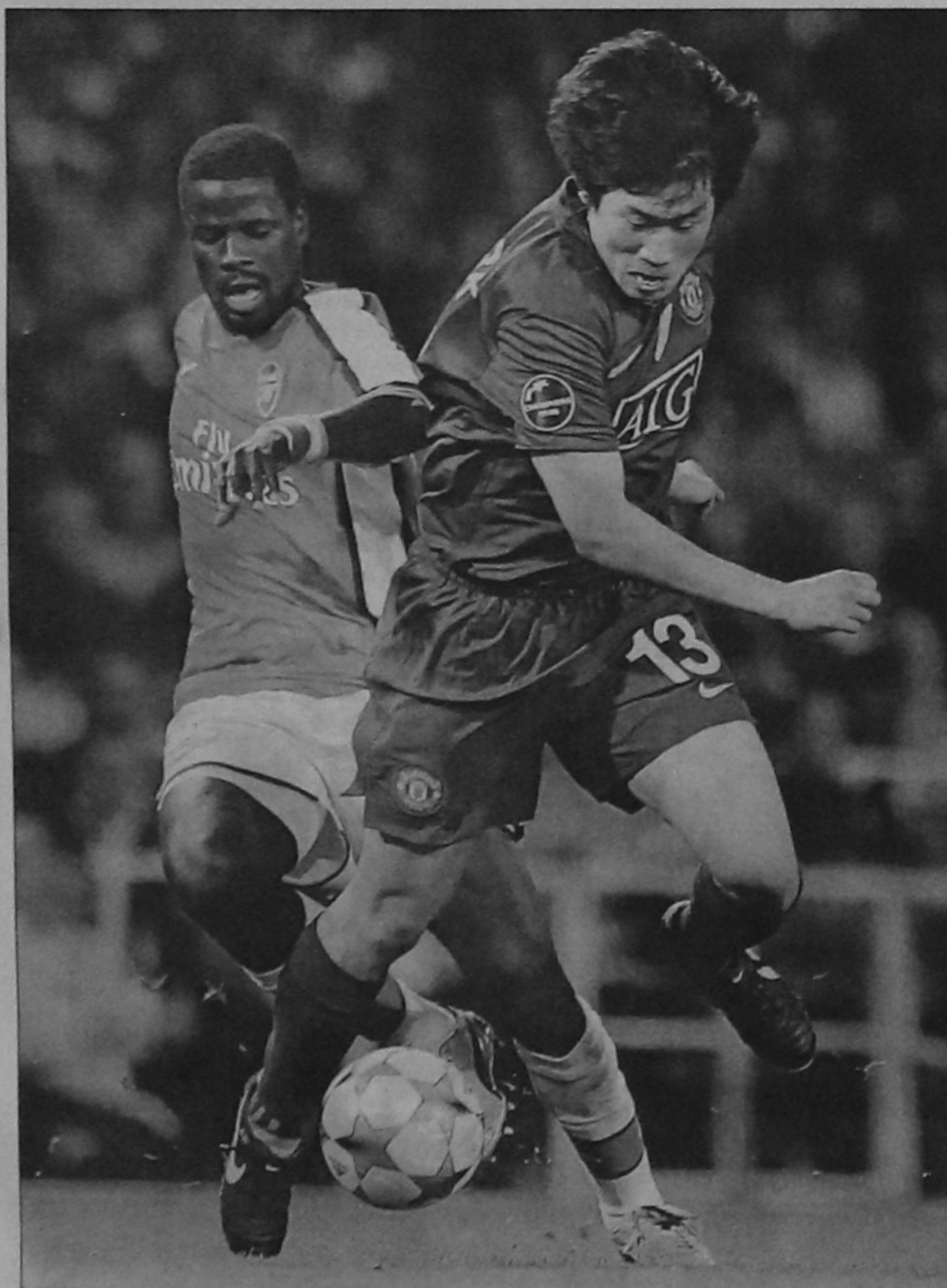


PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung (R) is challenged by Arsenal defender Emmanuel Eboué during their Champions League semifinal second leg clash at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday.