

Tension mounts in SA

AFP, Cape Town



Football's high and mighty were heading for Cape Town this week ahead of Friday's World Cup draw which will set the scene for the June 11-July 11 tournament.

More than three years after qualifying began, the 204 countries who set out to reach the sporting showpiece have been whittled down to 32 drawn from the six FIFA global federations.

They go into the hat at 7:00 pm (1800 GMT) on Friday with the 90-minute ceremony determining not just who plays who, but where they play in a crime-ridden country entrusted with hosting Africa's first World Cup.

It has not been an easy ride for organisers, with the country's ability to deliver top-class tournament infrastructure heavily scrutinised.

While the five new and five renovated stadiums are now almost complete, concerns remain over transportation and accommodation shortfalls, as well as security in a nation where 50 people are murdered every day.

But for national coaches like England's Fabio Capello, Dunga of Brazil, Spain's Vicente Del Bosque and Italy's Marcello Lippi, who will be among those in Cape Town this week, all they want to know is who their teams will play.

They will be split into eight groups of four with the seedings and draw procedure only due to be finalised on Wednesday, although no more than two European nations can be drawn together.

It seems likely that the system used for the 2006 World Cup will be retained, whereby a team's world rankings over the past three years and performances at the last two tourna-

ments are taken into account.

This would mean Brazil being top seeds, followed by Germany, Spain, Italy and England.

Once the lineups are decided, the focus will switch to next year and the opening game at the gleaming new Soccer City in Johannesburg on Friday June 11 between teams one and two from Group A.

The 63 matches that follow will span South Africa, from Polokwane in the northeast to Cape Town in the southwest, culminating in the final in Johannesburg on July 11.

The journey began on August 25, 2007 in Oceania when just 60 supporters turned up to watch Samoa play Vanuatu.

Since then, over 20 million fans have flocked to stadiums. Japan was the first team to book its ticket and Uruguay was the last.

Thirty-one of the teams have been here before with Slovakia the newcomer. Minnows New Zealand made it through and North Korea qualified for the first time since 1966, when England last lifted the trophy.

England are one of the favourites to do it again with Capello moulding a disciplined team where morale is high, with Wayne Rooney, Steven Gerrard, Frank Lampard and John Terry his lynchpins.

The Italian taskmaster expects to reach the final.

"Playing in the final would be success," he said. "For now, playing in it will do, rather than winning it. But if people are asking me what my aspiration is, then it is to reach the final."

Capello has identified Brazil as the team to beat but coach Dunga is reluctant to accept the tag of World Cup favourites.

"I think Brazil is in balance, technically and tactically, and also the physical

conditioning of the players is very good," he said.

"But it is not so long since people were saying we were not favourites at all. We need to look for our space to make our game and not pay any attention to what people are saying. All that matters is what we do on the pitch."

France are on the plane, but only just, with the run-up to the draw mired in controversy after the blatant Thierry Henry handball incident which put Raymond Domenech's side into the finals at the expense of Ireland.

The fallout has been so severe that FIFA president Sepp Blatter has called a crisis meeting for Wednesday here to deal with the issue and to discuss an ongoing investigation into match-fixing in Europe.

European champions Spain are currently the world's number one ranked team, running hot since Del Bosque took over with a perfect 10 wins out of 10 in qualifying.

But they have never won the World Cup and the former Real Madrid boss is not getting carried away.

"We must prove it on the pitch and not in our dreams, because there are giants of world football such as Brazil, Germany and Italy, who will have the same aspirations," he said.

Like Spain, no team from Africa or Asia has ever lifted the World Cup, and appears unlikely to do so next year.

But the prospects are brighter in South America with Brazil leading the pack, although an exciting and young Chilean side has also proved its credentials.

Mighty Argentina is an unpredictable element after only just hauling themselves over the line with Diego Maradona enduring a see-saw ride as coach that generated more questions than answers.

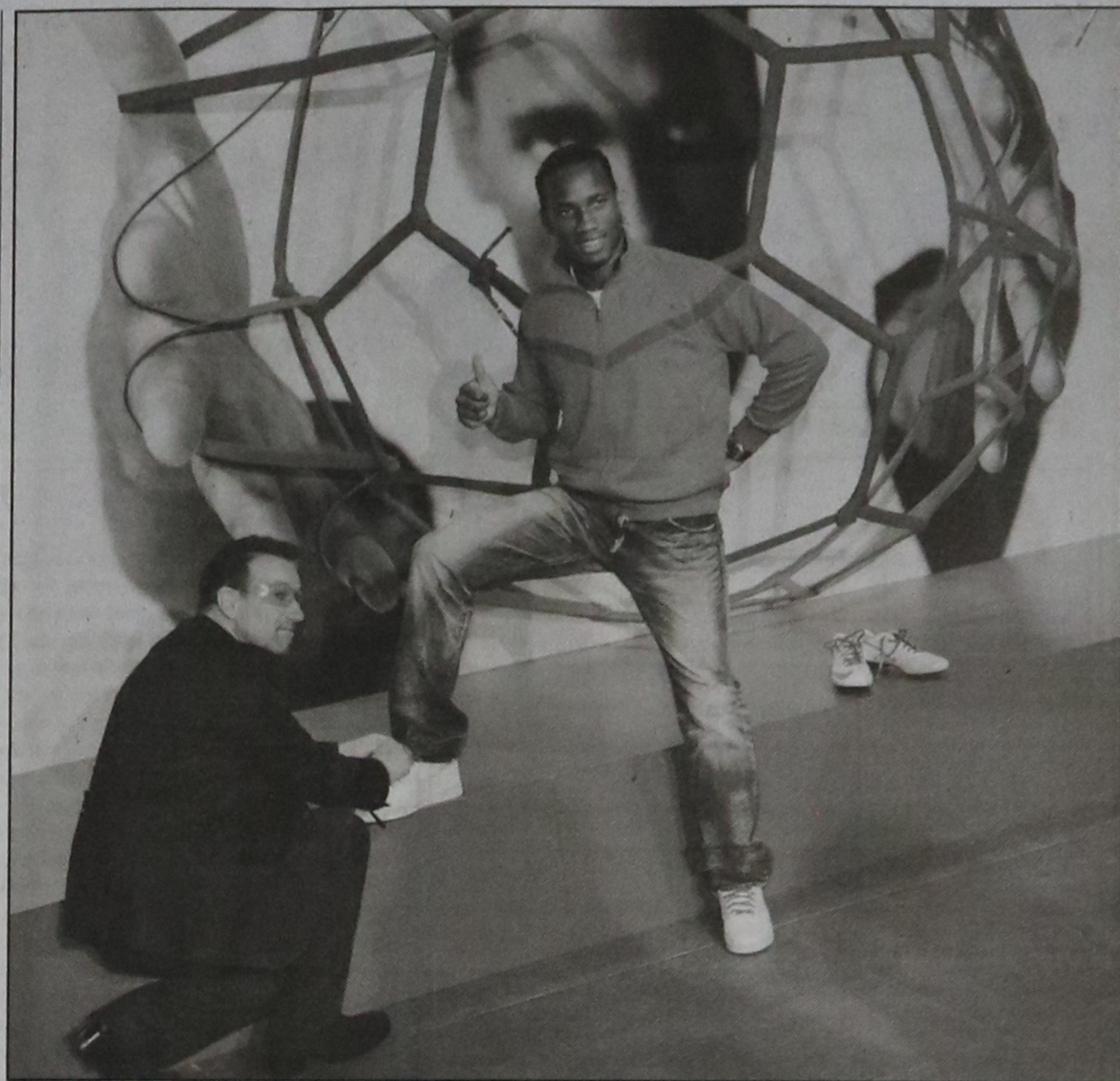


PHOTO: AFP

Didier Drogba (R) gives the thumbs up as rock star Bono ties his shoelace during a photocall to promote "Lace Up. Save Lives" a day before the World Aids day in London on Monday.

Strength to strength for Lionel

Football

AFP, Paris

Lionel Messi, awarded the Ballon D'Or accolade on Tuesday for his exploits with Barcelona and Argentina, has certainly proved he can handle the pressure.

It is more than four years since Diego Maradona lauded the man from Santa Fe as the player who should inherit his own mantle as national footballing hero and Messi, unlike several would-be successors who flattered to deceive, has gone from strength to strength.

Having started out with Newell's Old Boys in his homeland Messi soon came to Barcelona's attention, who moved him and his family to Europe as the club offered to provide treatment for the youngster's growth hormone deficiency.

"Without growth hormones Lionel would have grown, at best, to 1m50 by the time he reached adulthood," his father Jorge told L'Equipe Magazine.

Once installed in the first team, by the 2004-05 season, he also led Argentina to under-20 glory and then a season later featured prominently as Barca won La Liga and the Champions League - though he missed out on the final win over Arsenal as he had just returned from injury.

However, Messi rectified that particular omission last May with a superb goalscoring performance in the final win over Manchester United - he hit nine in the event in total - while also showing scintillating form as the Catalan club marched to La Liga and Spanish Cup for good measure.

At 22, he now is elevated to the Ballon D'Or status, succeeding Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo, the man he largely overshadowed in Sunday's league encounter at the Nou Camp which left Barca top of the league clear of their megabucks rivals.

Whereas Ronaldo, who pipped the Argentine to the post last year, is comfortable in the media spotlight, the timid Messi shuns the limelight, preferring to allow his talents alone to do all the talking.

According to his father, even as a youngster back home, "people would pay to see him play

with Newell's," his father once said ahead of his October 2004 debut against Espanyol.

His first goal against Albacete on May 1, 2005 made him the Spanish league's youngest ever scorer at 17, 10 months and seven days.

Having been top scorer in the under-20 competition four years ago Messi saw Barca set his contract get-out clause at 150 million dollars. The club swiftly extended that deal to 2010 and then again to 2014.

Amid Maradona's praiseworthy assessment, Catalan daily La Vanguardia also hailed the "devilish" talent in his idol's number ten shirt who "proves the master wherever he plays. The Maradona comparison comes automatically."

Barcelona daily El Mundo Deportivo is even more effusive.

"He has the left foot of Maradona, the switch of rhythm of (Johan) Cruyff and the lethal passing of Ronaldinho," the paper said of Messi.

With Ronaldinho and Samuel Eto'o also up front the club's attacking trident were collectively unstoppable.

And although both have now left, Messi's full range of skills have ensured that his club have not suffered but seamlessly carried on from where they left off.

Highlights in Barca's colours include a hat-trick against Real in a thrilling draw in 2007 at the Nou Camp and a thrilling slalom and finish in the Spanish Cup against Getafe, compared with Maradona's second goal against England in the 1986 World Cup.

With Argentina he has been a little less effective of late with the team generally struggling to find their form and limping through to the World Cup finals.

On that level, even Maradona has voiced a tad of criticism.

"Leo plays for Leo," the controversial national coach told Fox Sports last year.

Charging that Messi sometimes "forgets his teammates" Maradona added: "He's Deportivo Messi."

Nonetheless, Messi has every reason to shine for Maradona in South Africa, after former coach Jose Pekerman left him on the bench for the 2006 quarterfinal penalty shootout loss to Germany.

IN BRIEF

Benzema escapes unharmed

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's French striker Karim Benzema escaped unharmed after he lost control of his car and collided with a security barrier and a tree over the weekend, Spanish media reported Tuesday.

The player, who turns 22 later this month, was on his way home from Real Madrid's 1-0 Spanish league defeat to arch-rivals Barcelona when the accident happened in the suburbs of the Spanish capital, the reports said.

Benzema was driving at speeds of less than 50 kilometres (30 miles) an hour when the accident occurred and the airbags of his Audi were activated, sports daily AS said.

No racism in Italian football

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Marcello Lippi insisted Monday that racism was not a problem in Italian football but a problem of society.

The 61-year-old's comments come after Juventus were last week fined 20,000 euros for racist chants their fans directed at Inter Milan's Italian-born striker Mario Balotelli, whose parents are Ghanaian.

But questioned on the subject by students during a visit to Vicenza, in northeastern Italy, Lippi, who lead Italy to the 2006 World Cup title, said: "In Italy there is no case of racism in football."

"Racism is a problem which isn't part of our makeup. It's part of civil society, but unfortunately you have to talk about it when ten or twenty idiots want to make themselves heard in a stadium."

City top agents fees' list

AFP, London

Big-spending Premier League side Manchester City have proved a golden goose to agents as they top the list of agents fees paid out from October 2008 to September 2009 released on Monday.

City - who have failed to set the Premier League alight despite outlaying almost 150 million pounds in the same spell - paid out nearly 13 million pounds in agent fees far more than city rivals and defending champions Manchester United, who paid 1.5 million pounds.

In all agents benefited financially to the tune of 70.7 million pounds with newly-promoted Burnley the lowest spenders at 500,000 pounds.

Legends backing Africa

AFP, Johannesburg



African football legends Abedi 'Pele' Ayew and George Weah believe the continent can end its World Cup drought by winning the 2010 tournament in South Africa.

Cameroon reached the 1990 quarterfinals in Italy and Senegal repeated the feat 12 years later in South Korea, but no team from the 'Dark Continent' has made the penultimate stage.

Former Ghana midfield maestro and three-time African Footballer of the Year Pele believes the first World Cup to be staged on the continent offers its six representatives a glorious chance to break the duck.

"This is our best chance of lifting the trophy because if you study the history of the World Cup Brazil are the only team to win it outside their continent."

"We definitely will have one African team that goes far and when I say goes far I mean as far as raising the trophy. When I make this prediction people laugh, but I believe it," Pele insisted here.

"When I told football officials that

African champions Egypt would defeat world champions Italy during the FIFA Confederations Cup this year they all laughed.

"It happened and they had to admit I was right," he recalled, referring to the 1-0 loss the star-saturated 'Azzurri' suffered against the 'Pharaohs' in Johannesburg last June during the World Cup dress rehearsal.

Italy failed to make the semifinals while Egypt squandered a great chance to get there by crashing 3-0 to the United States, who sneaked through and went on to lose the final against Brazil after leading by two goals.

Egypt surprisingly failed to qualify for the 32-team international football showpiece scheduled to kick off on June 11 and finish on July 11 with the final at the 90,000-seat Soccer City stadium on the outskirts of Soweto.

But Pele is convinced Algeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria or automatic qualifiers South Africa can go all the way and end a Europe-South America dominance stretching back to the first World Cup 79 years ago.

"Look at Algeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Ivory Coast and Nigeria... these teams are

growing so fast," boasts Pele, whose son Andre helped Ghana win the world youth title in Egypt this year.

Pele also offered encouragement for struggling South Africa, whose recent goalless home draws with Japan and Jamaica ended a run of eight defeats in nine matches that triggered the sacking of Brazilian coach Joel Santana.

"They learnt about their weaknesses during the Confederations Cup and will get better," Pele said of the host nation, who rehired 1994 Brazil World Cup-winning coach Carlos Alberto Parreira for a second spell at the helm.

Former Liberia striker Weah, another three-time African Footballer of the Year, says preparations hold the key to an African success in a tournament the Brazilians have won a record five times.

"It will be a difficult task, but not impossible. There is a high possibility that an African team can win the World Cup if it prepares well," Weah said while touring 2010 African Nations Cup hosts Angola.

"Ghana have won the world youth title and Nigeria were runners-up in the world junior championship so why not an African winner of the World Cup?" he asked.

EUROPA LEAGUE Everton seek respite

Football

AFP, Paris

England's former Cup Winners Cup holders Everton have endured a torrid season thus far but on Wednesday they can give themselves a boost with victory in Greece against AEK Athens and at the same time end their opponents' interest in the competition.

While Everton cannot wrap up a spot in the knockout stages as they lie joint second on six points with Belarus outfit BATE Borisov with two matches remaining, Scotland's former European powerhouse Celtic are on the brink of adding to their country's footballing woes by bowing out of the competition.

The former European Cup winners need to beat group leaders Hapoel Tel Aviv and for Hamburg to fail to beat Rapid Vienna if they are to retain any hopes to avoid the ignominious exit of Rangers from the group stage of the Champions League and Scotland's failure to even make the top two of their 2010 World Cup qualifying group.

Elsewhere, both Rome clubs still have work to do if they are to make the last 32 - which sees

the top two from each group join the third-placed teams from the Champions League group stage which includes such intimidating opposition as Liverpool.

Lazio share second with Spanish side Villarreal but six points off leaders Salzburg and the Italian side face the tricky task of playing the Austrians away on Wednesday while Villarreal have the relatively easier task of playing away at pointless Bulgarian side Levski Sofia.

Roma play on Thursday at home to group leaders Basel and should they win and in the unlikely event of English Premier League side Fulham slipping up at home to bottom side Levski Sofia the Italians would progress leaving Fulham out of the picture.

Everton are still in contention for a place in the last 32 but defeat for AEK would signal the end of their hopes and leave them staring into the abyss of a trophyless season as they are 12 points off league leaders Olympiakos and already out of their domestic cup.

However, they are mustered keen to avenge their humiliating opening 4-0 defeat by Everton and one man especially fired up for the challenge is Argentinian striker Ismael Blanco, who like the team has not been firing on all cylinders unlike last season after netting 45 times in 64 appearances for AEK before this season.

'Xavi deserves it more than Messi'

AFP, Madrid

Former Spain coach Luis Aragones says he would have awarded the Ballon d'Or to Barcelona's Spanish international midfielder Xavi Hernandez instead of the club's Argentine striker Lionel Messi.

"I would give the award to Xavi. Although I don't believe too much in these awards, Messi as well as (Cristiano) Ronaldo and Xavi are qualified to win it. Strikers have more chances because goals always sell," he said.

The 22-year-old, whom Cristiano Ronaldo beat into second place last season for the accolade of Europe-based footballer of the year, easily saw off the Portuguese striker this year by 473 points to 233.

Xavi finished third with 170 points. The winner of the Ballon d'Or is selected by a panel of journalists and soccer officials in a vote organised by France Football magazine.

Marquez extends Barca deal

AFP, Madrid

Mexican international defender Rafa Marquez on Monday extended his contract with Barcelona until 2012, becoming the eighth player to renew with the European champions so far this season.

"I'm very happy to renew with a club where I've felt very wanted, where I've enjoyed myself and where I've suffered. I have to enjoy these moments, they pass very quickly," he said after signing his new contract.

"Now I need to recover full match fitness to try and win back a place in the starting eleven, though competition is tough. I think I still have a good chance of being in the starting line-up."

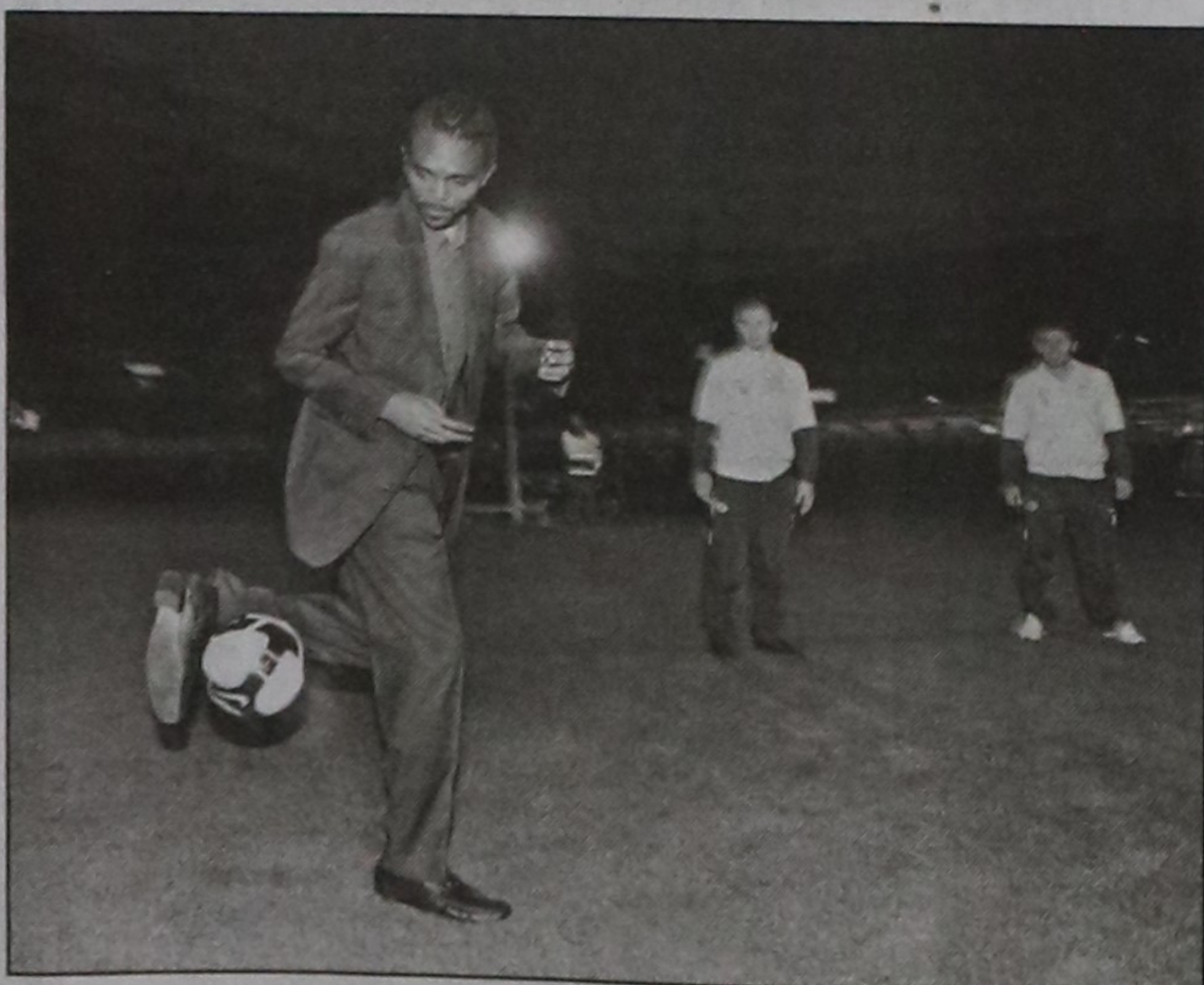


PHOTO: AFP

Former African player of the year Nwankano Kanu (L) plays with the ball during a presentation by Philips at the PSV Eindhoven Stadion on Monday. Philips presented the Solar-System, a system to light up soccer fields without the need for electricity by using LED-lighting, charged by the sun during daylight hours.