

Carvalho wants unity

AFP, London



Ricardo Carvalho has told his Chelsea teammates they must stick together in Wednesday's clash against Portsmouth to avoid any more of the costly blunders that threaten to derail their title challenge.

After moving five points clear at the top of the Premier League on the back of five successive cleansheets, culminating in a ruthless 3-0 win at Arsenal late last month, the previously impenetrable Chelsea defence has been leaking goals at an alarming rate.

Carlo Ancelotti's rearguard has been breached 10 times in four games in all competitions, with Everton taking advantage of more sloppy play by Carvalho, John Terry, Petr Cech and company in Saturday's 3-3 draw.

While Manchester United's defeat against Aston Villa allowed Chelsea to extend their lead over the champions to three points, there is a growing sense of unease over the chaotic nature of the league leaders' defending in recent weeks.

Those goals were the first conceded by Chelsea at home in the league since the opening day of the season, but the jeers that echoed around Stamford Bridge stands at the weekend reflected a fear that

Ancelotti's men could blow a golden chance to win the title through a careless lack of concentration.

Czech Republic goalkeeper Petr Cech has come in for the most criticism and his nervous displays have undoubtedly forced the back-four to defend too deep of late, giving opposition attackers the chance to force more mistakes.

But Portugal centre-back Carvalho, who should make his 200th appearance for Chelsea at the Bridge on Wednesday, insists the team are just going through the kind of freakish patch of bad luck where every error is punished by a goal.

"Right now every mistake we make, we concede a goal," he said. "We are playing well but we have to be more compact, especially at free-kicks and corners."

"When someone makes a mistake you have to be there to help him. Against Everton one goal came from a throw-in and the other two from free-kicks."

"I think I am playing well, however I can't enjoy it because we're drawing or losing. I'm a little bit frustrated."

If Chelsea could have hand-picked the opposition for a game they desperately need to win to steady the nerves, then rock bottom Portsmouth would surely be top of the list.

Pompey boss Avram Grant brings a team to Chelsea for the first time since being sacked by the Blues in the aftermath of the 2008 Champions League final

defeat to United in Russia.

But for Terry's penalty shoot-out slip in the Moscow rain, Grant would be a European champion and likely still Chelsea's coach.

Instead he is facing up to the prospect of a five-month struggle to keep Portsmouth in the top-flight against a background of financial uncertainty that has already seen the club fail to pay their players' wages twice this season.

Portsmouth fans issued a vote of no confidence in the club's board this week, but Grant can at least take heart from the determined way his side ground out a 1-1 draw at Sunderland on Saturday thanks to Younes Kaboul's stoppage time equaliser.

Grant believes surviving with Portsmouth is a far greater challenge than his task of steadying the ship when he succeeded Jose Mourinho at Chelsea.

"At Chelsea I took over a team that was on the way down and the challenge was to bring them back to winning ways and we did it," Grant said. "This is a different challenge, first to take the team away from the bottom and then for the future to make them an exciting team."

"The challenge is bigger here because there are so many problems. Everybody said to me when I was offered it not to take the job, but for me it made me even more ambitious to take it."



Brazil president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (C) holds the Brazilian football championship 2009 trophy obtained by Flamengo next to club striker Adriano (R) during a ceremony in Brasilia on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Carragher prays for salvation

AFP, Liverpool



Jamie Carragher has revealed that he has been praying nightly for divine intervention to ensure Liverpool end the season with some silverware and a place in the Premier League's top four.

Rafael Benitez's side have been eliminated from this season's Champions League and are in danger of missing out on a space among Europe's elite next season after winning only seven out of 16 league matches so far in this campaign.

A 2-1 defeat at home to Arsenal on Sunday left the Reds five points adrift of fourth-placed Aston Villa and centreback Carragher admits he has personally gone through one of the toughest times of his career.

"Part of playing for Liverpool is having big charac-

ter and that is what we need at the moment," the defender said.

"Between now and the end of May it has got to be a grind at times but we have got to stick together, get through it and, as I am doing every night, pray to God that at the end of the season there will be something worth what we have gone through at times, because it has been tough."

"I pray to God we win the FA Cup or the Europa League and we get in the top four, dust ourselves down at the end of the season and say 'It hasn't been so bad in the end', but at this moment it is tough."

"With the quality of players we have and the stature of the club, we realise we should do better."

"We can't look for excuses. We have to be big and strong and get on with it."

Benitez meanwhile has called for a display of character from his squad, who enter

tain Wigan at Anfield on Wednesday.

"The main thing now is that we have to show confidence, we have to show character," the Spaniard said.

"They play for Liverpool. We have to improve, we have to show character when we have problems and we must keep our confidence high."

"The only way to change things is to keep working hard and in this situation, when you are making mistakes, you have to be strong and try to do things properly in the future."

"We kept giving the ball away against Arsenal, it is something we have to improve on."

"Now we play Wigan on Wednesday here and we know we have to do better."

"We cannot be complaining, we cannot be arguing about anything. We must keep going and try to discover why we were so bad in the second half in terms of confidence."

IN BRIEF

Ginola's alimony case postponed

AFP, Marseille

A French court Tuesday postponed an alimony case against former France international footballer David Ginola brought by a woman claiming he is the father of her teenage child.

The unnamed 40-year-old woman has sued Ginola, 42, for child maintenance payments. He denies being the father of the woman's 17-year-old daughter.

The court in the southern French city of Marseille postponed the hearing to May 11. Lawyers explained that the court summons had not given Ginola enough time to respond since he now lives in Britain.

Ginola became a star of English football, notably with Premiership side Tottenham Hotspur in the late 1990s, and has since turned to film acting.

Euro 2012 logo, slogan unveiled

AFP, Kiev

UEFA President Michel Platini unveiled the official logo and slogan to be used at Euro 2012 at a ceremony here on Monday.

The logo is a design of two tulips - one red and one white - featuring the Polish and Ukrainian flags and a football, and the slogan is "Creating History Together."

Platini said: "These are two flowers which bloom. I hope that Poland and Ukraine will grow like them."

Euro 2012 is the first major football tournament to be awarded to Eastern Europe.

Appearing with Platini at the unveiling was Ukraine President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

Lehmann says sorry

AFP, Berlin

Stuttgart goalkeeper Jens Lehmann apologised to his team-mates after being sent off in their 1-1 draw with Mainz, the struggling club's Romanian striker Ciprian Marica revealed on Monday.

"He apologised," said Marica. "I hope that Jens will stay with us, but it's a shame what he did against Mainz."

The 40-year-old former Germany goalkeeper saw red in the 87th minute of the match at Mainz on Sunday for standing on the foot of the home side's Burkina Faso striker Aristide Bance.

Mainz equalised from the ensuing penalty to leave Stuttgart fourth from bottom in the Bundesliga standings despite their recent qualification for the last 16 of the Champions League.

After the match, Lehmann was involved in an altercation with a Stuttgart supporter outside the stadium that was captured by television cameras.

Stuttgart announced on Monday that Lehmann would not participate in forthcoming training sessions due to a knee injury.

AFP, Paris



Fulham, Valencia, Genoa and Lille are among the sides bidding to reach the knockout stage of the Europa League as the competition's group phase reaches its conclusion this week.

Premier League representatives Fulham are looking to join Roma in qualifying from Group E but face a winner-takes-all match at Swiss outfit Basel on Wednesday.

"We entered (the tournament) for experience and for the joy it gives our supporters and we've given them fantastic value at home in all the games we've played," said Fulham coach Roy Hodgson.

"We've certainly not let

ourselves down away from home. We won't let ourselves down in Basel. We want to win, we'd like to win and we'll try to win, don't worry about that."

Group B announced itself as the tournament's most difficult pool at the group stage draw and Valencia, Lille and Genoa can all qualify going into their final matches in the group, with leaders Valencia hosting Genoa and Lille taking on Czech side Slavia Prague in northern France.

FC Copenhagen travel to Sparta Prague with both sides level on seven points in Group K, while Lille's compatriots Toulouse have a must-win game at Club Brugge, who are a point above Alain Casanova's team in Group J.

"It's the final of the group. It will be decided between them and us," said Toulouse captain Etienne Didot.

"We knew that after drawing against Bruges at home (2-2) we would definitely have to win there to qualify. We're going there convinced that we can qualify and I think we're going to do it."

Fifteen clubs have already made sure of a place in the knockout phase, including Everton, Villarreal, Roma, Werder Bremen, Benfica and defending champions Shakhtar Donetsk, last season's UEFA Cup winners.

The list of top-ranked contenders for the inaugural trophy now also features the eight third-placed teams from the Champions League group stage, with Liverpool, Juventus and German champions Wolfsburg likely to pose the biggest threat to the sides already in the competition.

The draw for the round of 32 takes place at UEFA's headquarters in Nyon, Switzerland on Friday.

City urged to copy Barcelona

AFP, London



Sylvino believes that Manchester City can reach the top by copying the attitude of his former club Barcelona.

The Brazilian veteran made his first league start for City in the 3-3 draw with Bolton at the weekend, in place of injured England defender Wayne Bridge, and is set to continue in the side for Wednesday's trip to Tottenham.

The left back, who used to play for Tottenham's local rivals Arsenal, feels that replicating the attitude of his old team can help City achieve their lofty ambitions.

He said: "We can learn from the Barcelona way. They play the same way every game. They play the same against Chelsea as they do against a third or fourth division side in Spain."

Wednesday's encounter at White Hart Lane sees two teams with pretensions of the top four going head to head and will be seen as a key indicator on which has the best chance of making the leap into the Champions League.

Tottenham go into the game on the back of a disappointing 1-0 defeat at home to Wolves, while City are unbeaten in 13 matches in all competitions but have managed just 11 points from their last nine Premier League matches.

But Sylvino insists progress is being made as manager Mark Hughes attempts to turn the massive investment of the club's Abu Dhabi owners into success on the pitch.

"The club is moving in the right direction," the defender said. "We are changing the mentality of a whole club, not just 25 players."

"I was upset when Wayne was hurt because he is part of the future at City but I enjoyed the game at Bolton."

"I felt I had a good connection with Craig Bellamy and Robinho, and I am ready to play again at Tottenham if selected."

"Hopefully we will have more confidence to play in the opposition half; that is impor-

tant."

City will be without Bellamy, who was red-carded in the Bolton match, at Spurs due to suspension and Nigel de Jong could also miss out as he continues his recovery from swine flu, while Shaun Wright-Phillips is struggling with an ankle problem.

Harry Redknapp did his best to remain upbeat following the weekend home defeat to Wolves but no matter how often the Spurs manager insisted his side's season

would not stand or fall on one result, there was no denying that three crucial points had been dropped.

Spurs' season started brightly and coming into the Wolves game, Redknapp declared himself delighted with his players' displays in the away draws at Aston Villa and Everton.

But as has happened on so many occasions in the past, Tottenham's ambitions have been hit by inconsistency and that's a problem the manager must overcome if they are to fulfil their aim of finishing in the top four.

Victory over City would quickly erase the gloom generated by the Wolves clash that ended with an unpleasant altercation between left-back Benoit Assou-Ekotto and a home supporter that is now subject to a police investigation.

"It's a big game on Wednesday," admitted Redknapp. "You've got to move on, what's happened has happened."

Redknapp remains confident that, with all the top teams dropping unexpected points, his side will succeed in qualifying for Europe, although it remains to be seen in which competition.

"I'm not sure whether we'll get into the Champions League or the Europa League but we'll get into Europe," he said. "I've never said we are guaranteed to get into the Champions League."

"I can't take a team over that was bottom of the league when I took over and guarantee it's going to be a Champions League team, but we still have a great chance."

"Chelsea lost at Wigan, Arsenal lost to somebody, Liverpool lose to teams they should beat, but what can you do. It's going to be a lot more open at the top."

Robbie Keane's ineffective display against Wolves could mean a starting spot for Peter Crouch while Luka Modric is again expected to start on the bench after making his return from a broken leg at the weekend.

Ribery set for return

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich's France international winger Franck Ribery will make his return next weekend after two-and-a-half months out with injury, his coach Louis van Gaal said on Monday.

"He's better than ever because he can train without pain," said the Dutchman, who revealed that Ribery would likely only feature for a few minutes in the home match against Hertha Berlin on Saturday.

Bayern have overcome a difficult start to the season and currently sit third in the Bundesliga table but they have been without Ribery since October 3 due to tendinitis in his left knee.

"When Ribery plays, the competition in the Bundesliga isn't as strong. Without him we already won 5-1 at Bochum!" joked Van Gaal in reference to the Bavarian giants' most recent league game.

Ribery's return will be a short-lived affair regardless of how he fares on the pitch, because the German championship shuts down for the winter break after the next round of matches and does not resume until January 15.

Jose faces inquiry

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan manager Jose Mourinho is being investigated by the Italian Football Federation for verbally attacking a journalist at the weekend.

Mourinho allegedly set upon Andrea Ramazzotti after he spotted the Corriere dello Sport reporter in an area reserved for Inter's television station Inter Channel after Sunday's 1-1 draw with Atalanta.

According to his paper, Ramazzotti had been given permission to enter the cordoned-off zone by Inter's press officer.

Carlos eyes Real return

AFP, Madrid

Brazil defender Roberto Carlos, who is leaving Turkish giants Fenerbahce for Sao Paulo's Corinthians, said he hopes instead to return to Real Madrid to replace the injured Pepe.

"I am negotiating my December departure from Fenerbahce," he told Spanish sports newspaper Marca on Tuesday.

Reports from Turkey last week said Carlos, whose contract with Fenerbahce ends on December 20, had agreed a two-year deal with Corinthians.

Corinthians "are interested in me and we have a verbal agreement, but if Real calls me I will go immediately."

The 36-year-old arrived at the Turkish club in 2007 after 11 years with Real, which is now seeking a replacement for Pepe, who is out for the rest of the season with a knee injury.

"My life in football and the club of my heart is Real," Marca quoted Carlos as saying. "It would be a dream to return home to the Bernabeu and help this club win titles."

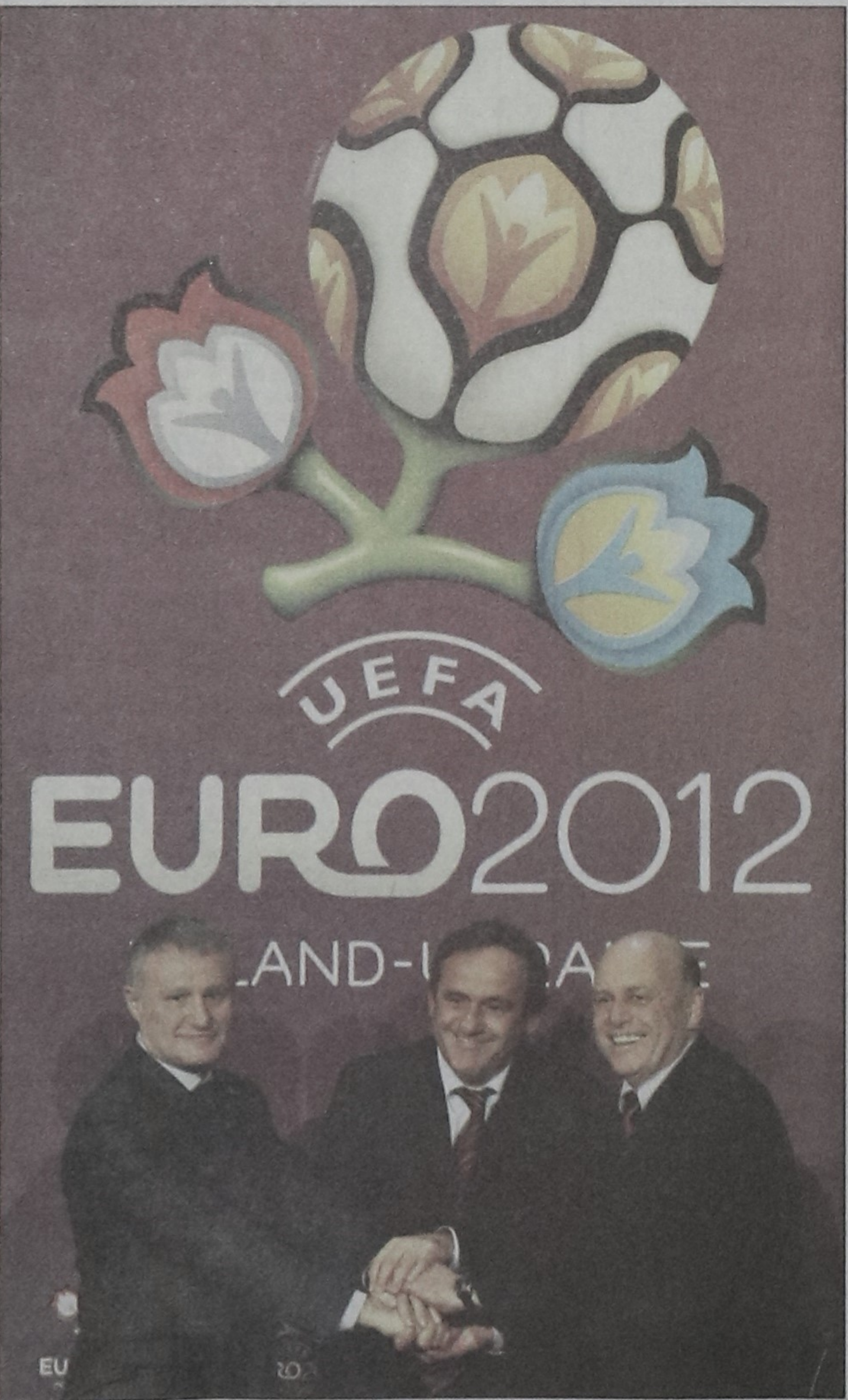


PHOTO: AFP

UEFA president Michel Platini (C) shakes hands with Polish FA president Grzegorz Lato (R) and Ukrainian Football Federation president Grigory Surkis during the official launching of the EURO 2012 logo in Kiev on Monday.