

CLUB WORLD CUP

Benitez inspires Estudiantes

Football

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Leandro Benitez's double strike inspired Copa Libertadores winners Estudiantes de La Plata to a 2-1 win over Pohang Steelers FC to book their place in the Club World Cup final here on Tuesday.

In a fiery encounter Steelers had to play the last quarter of an hour with only eight players.

Goalkeeper Shin Hwa Yong was red-carded for handling the ball outside the area in the 77th minute - Kim Jae-Sung received his second yellow card in the 72nd minute for a foul on Juan Sebastian Veron, and skipper Jae Won saw red in the 56th minute when he was booked for the second time.

In all Italian referee Roberto Rosetti issued eight yellow cards and one straight red to the Korean side and two yellows to the South Americans.

Estudiantes coach Alejandro Sabella believed the right team had won.

"It was not our best performance, but I think we deserved the victory," he said.

"Credit must go to Pohang who did well. The last 20 minutes of the first half was very even, and so was the start of the second half. But our second goal gave us the psychological advantage and Pohang became frustrated after that."

Steelers manager Farias rued his missing men.

"I'm proud of my players. We showed that

we could match the South American champions, and we were extremely unlucky to lose. We had three players sent off. It could have been a different story."

The Argentina team completely outplayed the South Koreans at the Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium.

Estudiantes could have taken the lead in the 10th minute when a Mauro Boselli overhead kick found the crossbar.

Denilson and Kim Jung-Kyum came close to giving Steelers the lead but their efforts were blocked by Estudiantes goalkeeper Albil.

After a couple of good efforts by Enzo Perez and one by Boselli, Estudiantes finally went ahead through a Benitez free kick from 25 yards at the stroke of the halftime whistle.

Benitez made it 2-0 in the 53rd minute when he latched on to a Perez cross and scored from a difficult angle.

Steelers' star striker Denilson cut the deficit in the 71st minute.

Following Hwa Yong's sending off the striker had to give up his attacking responsibilities and don the goalkeeping gloves.

Estudiantes now face the winners of Wednesday's other semi-final between Barcelona and Mexico's Atlante in Saturday's final.

The South Korean's meanwhile go into the third-place play-off.

"We're very pleased to have reached the final. If we meet Barcelona, then so be it. We'll be ready for them," reflected winning coach Sabella.



PHOTO: AFP

Estudiantes de La Plata midfielder Leandro Benitez (R) celebrates one of his two goals with teammate Enzo Perez during their Club World Cup semifinal against Pohang Steelers at the Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi on Tuesday.

'Owen needs regular team action'

AFP, London



England manager Fabio Capello insisted Wednesday that Manchester United striker Michael Owen needs regular team action to secure a place in his World Cup squad.

Owen's Champions League hat-trick against Wolfsburg led to suggestions he was a sure bet for a place in South Africa next year but he has only made substitute appearances against Aston Villa and Wolves since.

And Capello said: "I saw the last game he played, on television, and he scored three goals in the Champions League but the next game he did not play."

"For this reason, I ask myself why? Why (Wayne) Rooney plays always and Owen not? He is one of the important England players."

Owen has been in provisional squads recently and where he ranks come the end of the season will depend on injuries to other players.

At the moment Capello has 30 players in mind to compete for the 23 available places in the final World Cup squad.

"The players I choose will be fit and will play a lot of games," Capello told BBC Radio Five Live.

"In my mind I have 30 players because, I hope not, but if someone is not fit or injured, I have to decide the 23 players at the last moment."

"I follow all the players and check every moment what happens and when we decide,

the players that will come with me to South Africa will be fit."

"I am checking the general situation in every game, if they improve or don't improve, or some young players who play one or two games."

"(James) Milner at the moment has changed position, from the wing and now (is playing) like a (central) midfielder."

"(Wes) Brown played right-back last season and this year he has been centre-back."

England will be staying in Rustenburg, after Capello's fears over the state of the training pitches were eased.

"The facilities are okay, there were some problems with the pitches but I spoke to people there and they will be okay for June when we are in South Africa," he said.

"We found Rustenburg was the best place for us. It is quiet, good for security, is close to the stadium where we play the first game - everything is okay."

Before that, Capello wants to play Egypt at Wembley on March 3, then arrange a friendly with Mexico.

He added: "We have to decide. We are speaking with these countries but have not decided yet. I think we will play March 3 at Wembley, against Egypt, then we have to find the date to play against Mexico."

"There are some problems, I don't know if we will play Sunday or Monday. All the friendly games we played were against European teams and we know the style of these teams."

"We have to play against South Americans and African teams with a different style."

IN BRIEF

Pepe to have knee op in Portugal

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid defender Pepe will undergo surgery on his right knee on Thursday in Portugal to repair the ligament damage he picked up during a weekend league match, the Spanish club said.

The 26-year-old Brazilian-born Portuguese international tumbled to the ground in the 43rd minute of Real's 3-2 away victory over Valencia on Saturday after jumping alongside striker David Villa to reach a high ball.

He was stretchered off the pitch and is expected to be sidelined for six months because of the injury, meaning he may not be able to play for Portugal during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Portugal were drawn into the toughest group of the tournament alongside five-time champion Brazil, North Korea and Ivory Coast, regarded by many as Africa's best team.

The operation will be carried out at a hospital in Oporto, Portugal's second-largest city, Real said in a statement posted on their website.

Pepe has been a regular in Real's starting line-up since he joined the club from Porto in 2007.

Former Liverpool winger A'Court dies

AFP, London

Former Liverpool and England winger Alan A'Court has died at the age of 75, the club announced on Tuesday.

A'Court made 381 Liverpool appearances and scored 63 goals in an 11-year spell at Anfield after signing in 1952. He won five England caps and was part of England's 1958 World Cup squad, despite Liverpool being in the Second Division at the time.

USA to meet Honduras in WC tuneup

AFP, Chicago

United States will conclude a January training camp for the 2010 World Cup by facing fellow qualifier Honduras in a January 23 friendly at Los Angeles, the US Soccer Federation announced Tuesday.

North American-based talent will likely dominate both rosters as club teams do not have to release players for the match, which pits two regional rivals who together with Mexico advanced from CONCACAF qualifying last October.

The Americans, preparing for a sixth consecutive World Cup appearance, will face England on June 12 in their opener in South Africa and also face Slovenia and Algeria in first-round matches.

Honduras, which qualified for the first time since 1982, will open June 16 against Chile and also face Spain and Switzerland.

Anelka likes Domenech

Football

AFP, Paris

Temperamental French striker Nicolas Anelka insisted Wednesday that he has a better relationship with France coach Raymond Domenech than any of his predecessors.

"Despite what people say, it's with Domenech that I have the best relationship," the 30-year-old Chelsea striker told the newspaper 20 minutes on Wednesday.

"I've never been able to talk with a coach like that. Before, there was (Jacques) Santini, it was impossible to talk to him. (Roger) Lemerre, the same. (Aime) Jacquet, that's it? Also impossible."

Domenech, who led France to the final of the 2006 World Cup, has failed to win over the French public during his combative tenure, and has also proved less than popular with some of his team.

"Today (Domenech) is unpopular. Like Aime Jacquet in his time," said Anelka of 1998 World Cup winning coach Jacquet.

"You just have to be patient, strong mentally. And he's patient. Maybe in six months he will be

the 'Boss' and no one can insult him."

Anelka agreed that the French team felt they lacked the support of their public. "That's why we're always in a rage," he said.

"You mustn't think that we don't know when we play badly. After the return match against Ireland, myself and (Patrice) Evra said: 'We were rotten! The coach also told us that we were rubbish. We know it. But when we do things well, you have to say it too. It's said when we win 3-0, that's normal. And when we lose.... That's why we don't feel supported.'"

And the former PSG player admitted that he would find it hard to return to play in his native France.

"When you've lived and played abroad you can't return to France. You're not accepted as you were before. Everyone is waiting for you to fall flat on your face," he said.

"In France, you can't do what you want to. I'd like to live in France but it's impossible. You know why, concerning taxation... If I want to drive a big car people look at you differently."

"I don't want to play football and pay 50 per cent of what I earn. If that shocks people, too bad. But France is a hypocritical country."

'Title race wide open'

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger is hoping he will not have to deliver another blast at his players when they take on Burnley on Wednesday looking to maintain the momentum that has put them back in the Premier League title race.

Wenger was credited with inspiring the Gunners to a 2-1 win at Liverpool on Sunday with a half-time tirade in the dressing room.

But he admits that such an approach cannot work all the time or with every player.

"As a manager, you must first of all love to help people, to give them a chance in life, and to develop players, then you must have a big resistance to stress - all the rest, you learn," the Frenchman reflected on Tuesday.

"It has always been the same. Every player is under big pressure, despite the fact they are idolised, they need help. At a young age, people treat you like a mature man, but you are not."

With Chelsea and Manchester United both dropping points at the weekend, Arsenal are back within striking distance of the leaders and Wenger expects the title race to remain wide open for the rest of the season.

"Instead of having four teams, I believe you have six, seven or eight teams who can all cause a surprise at any weekend."

"Things change very quickly. What looks for definite in this league is just short-term. No situation is definitely established."

"Chelsea looked to be running away with it two weeks ago, today it is different. That is why,

certainly since I have been here, this is the most open championship."

Wenger believes the weekend's events will have sent out a message that his current crop of Arsenal stars are more resilient than they have been given credit for, but he underlined the importance of not letting performance levels slip against Burnley.

"If we have learned one thing from the beginning of the season until now, it is that every single team has to be considered very seriously and we have to be highly committed and focused," he added.

Midwinter fixtures in England's northwest have proved something of a minefield for Arsenal in the past with Bolton and Blackburn notably adopting a physical approach that has infuriated Wenger.

But Burnley boss Owen Coyle insists his players will attempt to take on the Londoners at their own game as they seek to repeat last season's League Cup win over them.

The Scotsman said: "If you watch our team, we look to play football. We don't have overly-physical players in our team."

"We like to think we are competitive but there has always been good football in games between ourselves and Arsenal and I don't see any reason why that should be any different tomorrow night."

Burnley have lost just once at Turf Moor this season and memorably took all three points against Manchester United at the start of the campaign.

"Derby were relegated with 11 points with double the budget that we have got so we are doing this against all the odds," Coyle said.

Coach blackmails keeper

AFP, Paris



Paris Saint-Germain goalkeeper Apoula Edel is being blackmailed by his former coach and advisor Nicolas Philibert, the club's sporting director Alain Roche told AFP on Tuesday.

Philibert worked with Edel in Cameroon, where the player was born, and persuaded him to move to Armenia in 2002.

According to a report that appeared in Tuesday's edition of Le Parisien newspaper, Philibert claims that Edel owes him 30,000 euros but the naturalised Armenian international refuses to pay him.

Following this refusal, Philibert allegedly provided information to Saint-Etienne, PSG's opponents on Sunday, that cast doubt on the goalkeeper's true age and identity.

Saint-Etienne accordingly filed a pre-emptory complaint prior to their match at the Parc des Princes, which they lost 3-0 with Edel keeping goal for the home side.

"In 2000 and 2001 I was the coach (at

Cameroonian side Espoirs de Yaounde) of Ambroise Beyamena (Edel's real name, according to Philibert), who was 19 years old," Philibert told France Bleu radio.

"This player has behaved very badly towards me for four or five years."

Philibert went on to allege that Edel has not settled outstanding debts between the two men.

"I visited him at his hotel in Montpellier before PSG's match (on August 8)," Philibert said.

"I told him that I was not happy with his behaviour and he laughed in my face. I told him: 'Wait until I denounce you for lying about your age and your identity'. He was 19 in 2000, so he is 27 today."

PSG and the French Professional League officially list Edel's date of birth as June 17, 1986, making him 23.

On Sunday, PSG president Robin Leproux lamented the reservations raised by Saint-Etienne ahead of the league game between the clubs.

"It is the act of club directors who have lost their nerve and their composure," he said. "Regarding Edel, he has all his papers in order, approved by FIFA, passport etc."

Mourinho admits guilt

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan manager Jose Mourinho on Tuesday owned up to verbally attacking an Italian journalist in a bust-up that is being investigated by the Italian Football Federation.

Mourinho set on Andrea Ramazzotti after he came across the Corriere dello Sport reporter in an area used for interviews by Inter's television station Inter Channel after Sunday's 1-1 draw with Bergamo.

"It's true that I insulted one of your colleagues and that I used a word that I can't repeat here, but there was no physical assault," he told a press conference ahead of Wednesday's Italian Cup clash with Livorno.

"I hope that it's the first and last time in my career that I use this word," he told the media briefing which was partially boycotted by sections of the Italian press.

Mourinho resorted to a touch of humour to try and diffuse the row.

"Today I would like to end this story and the best way to do that is in good spirits by saying that I'm waiting for a Christmas present from him because up to this moment the only famous Ramazzotti was (signer) Eros, but since the last couple of days it's been Andrea."

The Portuguese manager said he would accept any punishment handed down to him by his club, but said he considered it "ridiculous" that the matter should be the subject of an official Italian Football Federation inquiry.

"It's got nothing to do with them," he insisted.

Lehmann gets 3-match ban

AFP, Frankfurt

Stuttgart goalkeeper Jens Lehmann has been banned for three games by the German Football Federation's (DFB) disciplinary commission after his red card in last weekend's Bundesliga game.

The winter break means that Lehmann will not play until the end of January, dealing a blow to his team who are struggling in 15th position in the Bundesliga with just 13 points.

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.

The DFB justified the severity of the penalty by the fact that Lehmann's action was "deliberate".

Before the match Lehmann was also fined 40,000 euros for criticising his club's decision to fire former coach Markus Babel.

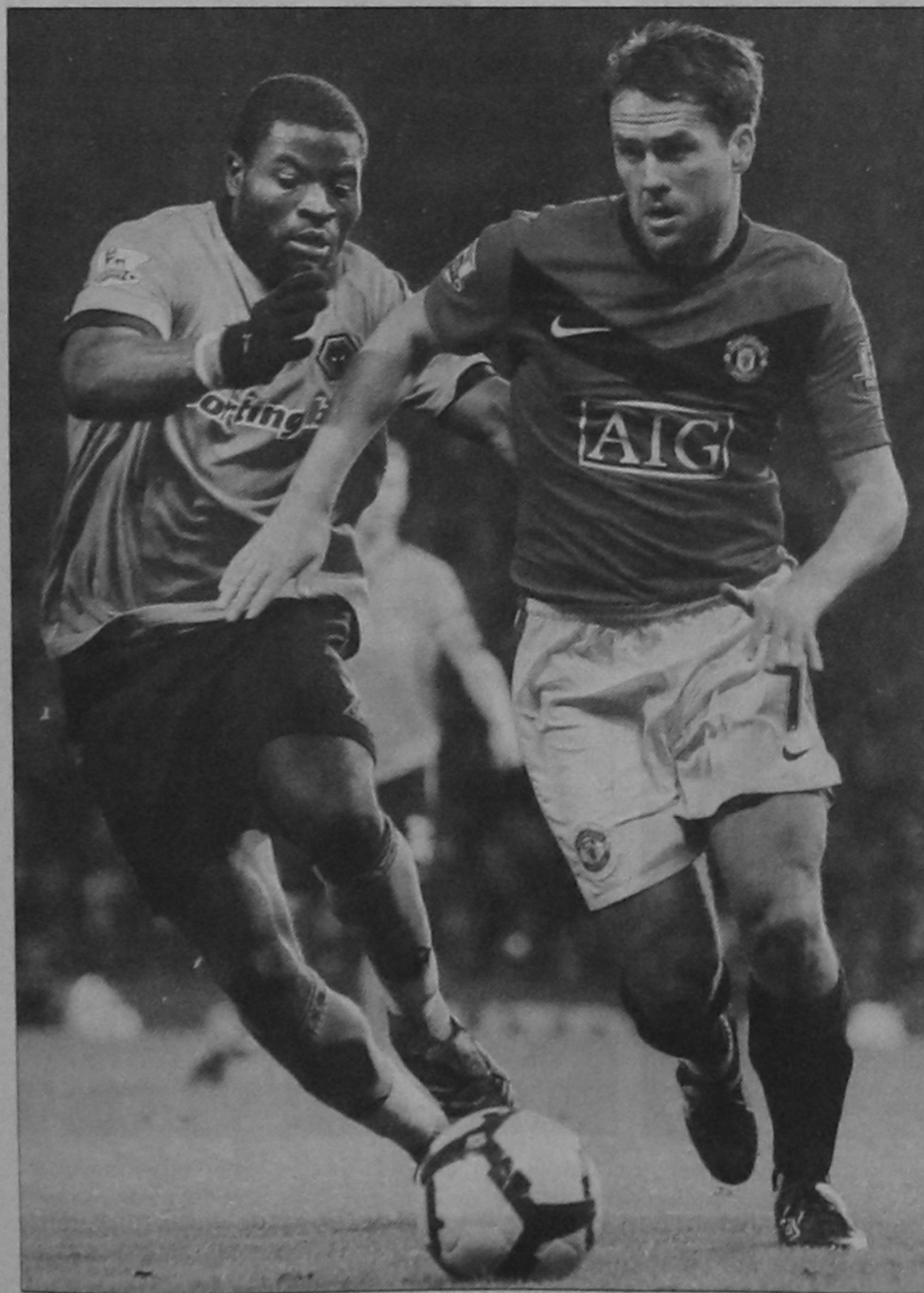


PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United striker Michael Owen (R) is challenged by Wolverhampton Wanderers defender George Elokobi during their Premier League clash at Old Trafford on Tuesday.