

Robin out for season

AFP, London



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said on Tuesday he'd all but given up on the idea of Dutch striker Robin van Persie playing for the English Premier League club again this season.

However, he stressed the player would regain full fitness and once more be a force at top-flight level.

The 26-year-old forward suffered a right ankle injury while on international duty in November.

The Gunners had hoped the striker might be out for six weeks but instead he needed surgery and now Wenger believes the best van Persie and Arsenal can hope for is a return towards the end of the current campaign.

"If you are very positive you would say (he'll be back in) April," Wenger told the club's website. "If you're a bit cautious you say May. It is virtually the rest of the season."

"Personally I thought 'Let's put it in my head that he will not play again this season and hope that I will have a good surprise'," the Frenchman added.

However, Wenger is confident van Persie will bounce back from the injury and rediscover his top form next season.

"When you have such a big surgery there is one thing that is important first of all, and that is the option of the surgeon, will he be the player he was before? We had a clear answer. Yes," Wenger said.

"The second thing that is very important in the first stage after surgery is has he an infection or not? He hasn't."

"The third thing is patience. At the moment he cannot do anything, he is just sitting at home waiting until he can work again. The first two steps have been very successful."

Van Persie's injury has led to speculation that Wenger will move for another forward when the transfer window re-opens next month.

Arsenal are third in the Premier League table and through to the knockout stages of the Champions League.

Wenger said he would have no concern in signing a player in January who was cup-tied for the Champions League, just as he did when bringing influential Russia forward Andrey Arshavin to north London at the same stage last season.

"Yes, I would," Wenger said when asked. "We are going for the domestic title and the FA Cup as well and doing that allows you to rest a player for the Champions League or play another player in the Premier League."

"Of course I would prefer the player who can play in both competitions and so it would mean the player has the quality to play in the long-term for Arsenal Football Club."

"But we have an interested eye on the transfer window and if the right player turns up then we will do it."

"Sometimes you think that is a bargain you cannot turn down and don't forget Arshavin got us into the Champions League last season."

Busby Babe Scanlon dies

AFP, London

Former Manchester United player Albert Scanlon, one of the survivors of the Munich air disaster, has died aged 74, the club said on Wednesday.

Scanlon, who was one of the 'Busby Babes' earning their nickname for being trained up through the youth system to playing for the first team under manager Matt Busby, made his debut for United in 1954 aged 19 and had reportedly been unwell for some time.

Eight of his teammates and three officials were killed when their plane crashed in a blizzard at Munich airport in 1958 following a European Cup match.

Scanlon suffered a broken leg and fractured skull in the crash, but recovered to play again in the 1958/59 season, scoring 16 goals to help United finish runners-up in the league.

Scanlon left Old Trafford in 1960 ending a six-year association with the club, that included 127 senior appearances and 35 goals, United said.

His departure was followed by spells at Newcastle, Mansfield and Lincoln.

"Manchester United is sad to report the death of former player Albert Scanlon," the club said on its website.

"Everyone at Manchester United sends deepest condolences to Albert's family and friends."

USA to give unheralded talent a chance

AFP, Chicago

US coach Bob Bradley will give unheralded talents an early chance to show they can contribute to the World Cup side next June in South Africa at a training camp that opens January 4 in Los Angeles.

The Americans, set for a sixth consecutive trip to the global football showdown, will look at 30 players based on Scandinavian or US clubs for a camp that culminates in a January 23 friendly against Honduras.

The camp lineup features 23 players with 10 caps or less, nine seeking a first-ever US appearance, the most capped players being Aarhus midfielder Benny Feilhaber with 30 and Dallas defender Heath Pearce with 28.

"This is the start of six months of preparations for the World Cup and it is important that we get started off heading in the right direction," Bradley said. "We are continuing to evaluate the player pool as we move towards finalizing our roster."

Among those on hand will be Major League Soccer goalkeeper of the year Zach Thornton of Chivas USA, defender of the year Chad Marshall of Columbus and rookie of the year Omar Gonzalez, a defender for the Los Angeles Galaxy.

Another defender in the camp will be Jonathan Bornstein, who scored the equaliser in the dying seconds of extra time in a 2-2 home draw with Costa Rica that put the US squad atop regional qualifying and ousted the Ticos from the World Cup.



PHOTO: AFP

Argentina coach Diego Maradona (C) watches the friendly match between Catalonia XI and his team from the stands at Nou Camp on Tuesday. Argentina lost 2-4.

Capello picks penalty takers

INTERNET, undated



England manager Fabio Capello has already picked out his penalty takers in the event of a sudden-death shoot-out at next summer's World Cup in South Africa.

Penalties have been the downfall of England at previous World Cups, with the side being knocked out of the 1990, 1998 and 2006 tournaments via spot-kicks.

And while Capello claims that penalties are a 'lottery', he believes it is important to send the right player to do the job in the right frame.

"Penalties are a lottery," Capello said. "I remember some very important players didn't take penalties because they didn't feel sure they would score."

"For this reason, with penalties, when the time comes and you have to choose who should take them, you ask and the players say 'no, please' and that can even be the very best players."

"I prefer to choose the players who want to take penalties and I always train with penalties in my mind."

Capello has several players in his squad who take penalties for their club sides - Frank Lampard, Wayne Rooney, Gareth Barry, James Milner and Jermain Defoe all regularly take spot kicks in the Premier League - and the Italian knows who he will count on should the situation arise in South Africa.

"I know who the best players are to take them, already. I know. But the pressure at the moment you have to take the penalty is different," Capello explained.

"During training, the goal is big and the keeper is small. But when you have to score a penalty to win the World Cup, the goal is little and the keeper is big. It is difficult to score under that pressure."

Capello added that he has been in touch with Manchester United's Rio Ferdinand and is confident that the defender will have recovered from his calf injury by next month.

"I spoke with Rio last week and he was good. He is very confident he will be able to

play after January 15," he said.

"He told me he is really, really happy because he has no pain and he has started to train."

The Italian also confirmed that he will insist on his squad getting plenty of training time with the new World Cup ball which will be used in the tournament, claiming that the change will have a big role to play in South Africa.

"The one thing that has really changed is the ball," he explained.

"With this ball it is possible to shoot from long distances and that will be a big problem for the keeper so it will be important for us to train and get used to the World Cup ball."

"That will be really important, not only to learn to play with the ball but also to adapt to altitude, because the bounce is different and the characteristics of the ball is different."

"You have to understand exactly what happens when you have to play in Pretoria, Johannesburg or Rustenburg where you are at over 1500m."

Ancelotti backs Terry

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti has likened John Terry to Italian greats Franco Baresi and Paolo Maldini in his latest show of support for his beleaguered captain.

The England skipper has been having to defend himself from accusations of money-grabbing after the News of the World tabloid on Sunday alleged he'd accepted a financial payment to provide a tour of Chelsea's training ground.

The paper claimed Terry, who captained the Premier League leaders in Sunday's 1-1 draw at West Ham, arranged the visit to Chelsea's Cobham

training complex for three undercover reporters posing as businessmen without permission from Ancelotti.

It is claimed that Terry took a 10,000 pounds payment, 8,000 pounds of which he wanted to go to the 'Make A Wish' charity for children with the other 2,000 pounds going to a middleman.

Ancelotti dismissed the report and the former AC Milan coach went further by telling Tuesday's London Evening Standard that centre-back Terry reminded him of Rossoneri defensive greats Baresi and Maldini, whom he played alongside at the San Siro.

"Terry is like Franco Baresi and Paolo Maldini in personality, character and leader-

ship," Ancelotti said.

"I am very lucky to have this player as my captain," the Italian added.

Ancelotti also drew a comparison between Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich and the Russian billionaire's Milan counterpart Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister.

"Abramovich is like Berlusconi," Ancelotti said. "He has a passion for his club, he likes to speak about football, as does Berlusconi. Both of them like to watch football on television. After a game he comes to the dressing room."

"I never think that if I don't win games Roman will remove me. My aim is to do the best for this club, as I have done for other clubs."

City deny lying to fans

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City insisted Tuesday they had not lied to their supporters over when they approached Roberto Mancini to become their new manager.

In a prepared statement at Monday's news conference to present Mancini as the replacement for the sacked Mark Hughes City chief executive Garry Cook claimed the Italian had agreed to join the club on Friday, two days after a 3-0 defeat to Spurs.

Mancini appeared to contradict that statement, however, by revealing that he had first met with City chairman Khaldoon Al-Mubarak in London a fortnight ago.

British press reports Tuesday were overwhelmingly critical of the way in which City had gone about sacking Hughes and bringing in Mancini, while fans phoned up Eastlands to complain about the club's conduct.

But in a statement issued Tuesday, City denied supporters had been misled.

"Yesterday, CEO Garry Cook and new manager Roberto Mancini together took to the

stage to give journalists and, more importantly, our fans the complete picture of the events of the past few days and week," the statement said.

"The outcome was characterised in a way which has suggested that the football club and Garry Cook has lied to its fans. Manchester City Football would like to point out that this is absolutely not the case."

Mancini claimed he had met Khaldoon in London "only to speak in general on football." Cook, in an unscripted intervention, added: "Two weeks ago Roberto met Khaldoon Al-Mubarak in London and after the Spurs game he was contacted for further discussions of a more serious nature."

"The discussions in London were general, they were about football and they were about considering managerial options at that point."

Meanwhile Nedum Onouha added to City's injury problems ahead of Mancini's first game in charge, against Stoke on Boxing Day, when he was ruled out for up to four weeks on Tuesday with a calf muscle strain.

Fellow defender Joleon Lescott has recently undergone minor knee surgery and is also in line to miss Saturday's league match.

SFA agrees Levein deal

Football

AFP, Glasgow

The Scottish Football Association (SFA) said Wednesday they had agreed a two-and-a-half-year contract with Craig Levein to become Scotland manager.

But the contract has not yet been signed due to adverse weather conditions. However, if Dundee United boss Levein can travel down from his Fife home to Hampden Park, Scotland's Glasgow home ground, the SFA plan to hold a news conference later on Wednesday.

Earlier, Dundee United said that, subject to confirmation of compensation from the SFA, Levein would be succeeding George Burley, sacked as Scotland manager after last month's 3-0 friendly international defeat by Wales.

Levein himself told United's website he was on his way to the national job.

"While it is a great honour to be asked to manage your country, it was a very difficult decision to leave Dundee United," he said.

"I have, and will continue to have, a great affection and respect for the club and its supporters, who have given me

such strong support from the day I arrived."

"I also leave behind a great bunch of players and a strong backroom staff and I know the club is in good hands."

"I wish them and Dundee United well for the future."

Levein, 45, has been the favourite to succeed Burley since Rangers manager Walter Smith ruled himself out of a return to the Scotland job.

But his move from Tannadice appeared to be foundering Tuesday on the issue of compensation, with United chairman Stephen Thompson saying the club had been treated "shabbily" by the SFA.

However, Thompson confirmed Wednesday that United were seeking a new manager to replace Levein and that Peter Houston will act as caretaker boss, assisted by Gary Kirk, until a permanent replacement for Levein is appointed.

"It is with great regret and disappointment that I confirm Craig Levein is leaving Dundee United," Thompson said.

"While we always knew he would move on to a bigger job and are flattered that the job he has done here has brought him to the attention of the national team, we're nevertheless very disappointed Craig is leaving us at this time."

"However, he leaves with our gratitude and best wishes for the future."

Thompson added: "We now move on and look to our own future...we won't be rushing into appointing someone else, we'll take our time and look at all the options."

Burley was dismissed last month after a Wales defeat which followed Scotland's failure to reach the play-offs for a place in next year's World Cup finals in South Africa.

Levein, a former Scotland international whose playing career was ended prematurely by injury, made his reputation as a manager with a successful 2000-04 spell in charge of Hearts.

A brief, unhappy stint as manager of English Championship side Leicester followed and Levein returned to management in Scotland with Raith Rovers before taking over at Dundee United in October 2006.

He guided the Tangerines to fifth place in the Scottish Premier League (SPL) last season and they are currently fourth in the table.

The SFA has indicated that it wants to have the new manager in place before the draw for the Euro 2012 qualifiers is made on February 7.

Turner gets 4-game ban

AFP, London



Sunderland defender Michael Turner will now serve a four-game ban for his sending-off against Manchester City after the Football Association (FA) added an extra match to the usual suspension.

He will miss the Boxing Day Premier League clash with Everton, the trip to Blackburn two days later as well as the FA Cup third round tie against non-league Barrow and the home game against Bolton on January 9.

Turner won't be available again until Sunderland face current Premier League leaders Chelsea on January 9.

He was sent-off by referee Andre Marriner during the closing stages of Sunderland's 4-3 Premier League loss away to City at Eastlands on Saturday

after catching Gareth Barry with an elbow.

Sunderland manager Steve Bruce branded the decision a joke and announced the club would appeal.

The Black Cats argued the standard three-game ban is excessive but an independent FA regulatory commission landed Turner with a four-game ban on Tuesday, effectively for wasting their time, as they said the appeal had no chance of success.

The commission's statement said: "Turner claimed the standard punishment is clearly excessive."

"But this was rejected by the commission and the defender will now receive a four-match ban - increased by one game as the commission felt the claim had no prospect of success - starting with immediate effect."

Bruce, speaking immediately after the match, was far from convinced Sunderland would get much joy given he'd

complained about Marriner's display during a recent match against West Ham where Black Cats striker Kenwyne Jones was sent-off.

"Because I have complained about him, I get that decision," said Bruce.

"You have got to raise your elbows when you are jumping for a ball," Bruce, a former Manchester United central defender, added.

"I might as well tell my centre-half not to head it next week because he might be sent-off."

"I hope the referee looks at it again. I doubt it though."

Bruce could be in trouble with the FA for his comments about Marriner.

The governing body said on Tuesday they had written to Bruce seeking his observations following media comments made immediately after the match at the City of Manchester Stadium.

Bruce has until December 31 to respond.

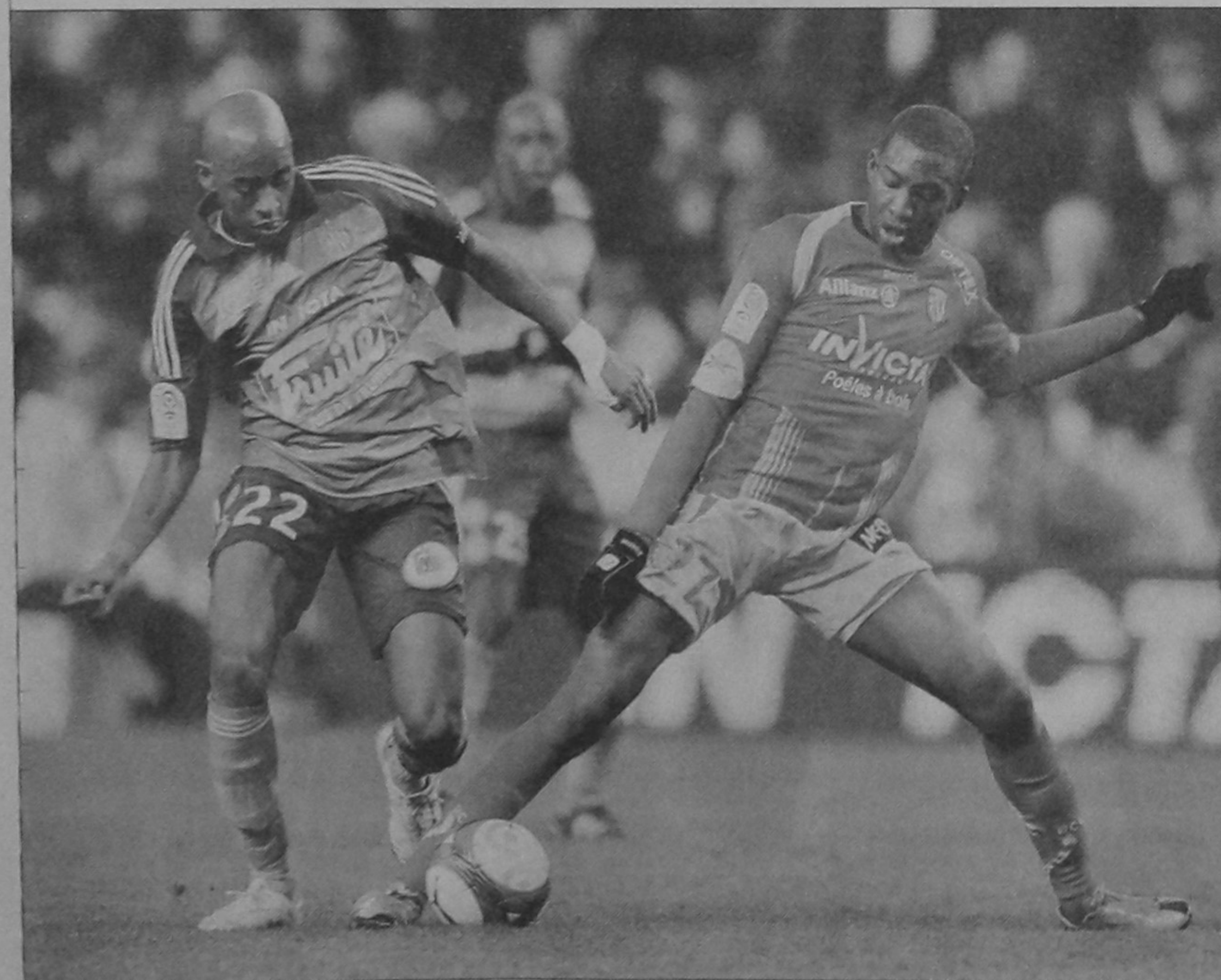


PHOTO: AFP

Lens midfielder Samba Sow (R) vies with Saint-Etienne counterpart Fernandes Gelson during their League One encounter at the Felix Bollaert Stadium on Tuesday. Lens won 1-0.

IN BRIEF

Spain to play 3 friendlies before WC

AFP, Madrid

Spain will play three international friendlies in the weeks before the World Cup in South Africa next year and will be based near Johannesburg during the tournament, the nation's football federation said on Tuesday.

The European champions will play two friendlies at home, on May 29 and June 8, and one away on June 5. The squad's opponents for the matches have not yet been determined.

Del Bosque to stay till 2012

AFP, Madrid

Spanish football authorities have agreed a two-year contract extension with coach Vicente del Bosque taking him through till 2012.

"That's the rule with us - a two year extension for those who secure us qualification," said Spanish Football Federation president Angel Maria Villar referring to Spain's comfortable qualification for the World Cup in South Africa next year.

The 59-year-old Del Bosque took over from Luis Aragones after Spain won the Euro 2008 title - and has lost just one game since then, against the United States in the Confederations Cup.

Nuremberg appoint Hecking

AFP, Berlin

Dieter Hecking was named on Tuesday as the new coach at German first division side Nuremberg, taking over from Michael Oenning who was sacked on Monday.

The 45-year-old Hecking was in charge of Hanover before he stood down from the job in August. Prior to that he made his name as coach at Aachen taking them back into the Bundesliga in May, 2006.