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20

Search

Irish finish with home game

Irish finish with home game Republic of Ireland manager Brian Kerr has been granted his wish for a home game as the final World Cup qualifier. Ireland will close their bid to reach the 2006 finals by playing Switzerland in Dublin on 12 October 2005. The Republic met the Swiss in their final Euro 2004 qualifier, losing 2-0 away and missing out on a place in the finals in Portugal. The Group Four fixtures were hammered out at a meeting in Dublin on Tuesday. The Irish open their campaign on 4 September at home to Cyprus and wrap up the 10-match series on 12 October 2005, with the visit of Switzerland. Manager Brian Kerr and FAI officials met representatives from Switzerland, France, Cyprus, Israel and the Faroe Islands to arrange the fixture schedule. Kerr had hoped to finish with a clash against France, but got the reigning European champions as their penultimate home match on 7 September 2005. The manager got his wish to avoid a repeat of finishing their bid to qualify with too many away matches. Republic of Ireland v Cyprus; France v Israel; Switzerland v Faroe Islands. Switzerland v Republic of Ireland; Israel v Cyprus; Faroe Islands v France. France v Republic of Ireland; Israel v Switzerland; Cyprus v Faroe Islands. Republic of Ireland v Faroe Islands; Cyprus v France. Cyprus v Israel. France v Switzerland; Israel v Republic of Ireland. Switzerland v Cyprus; Israel v France. Republic of Ireland v Israel; Faroe Islands v Switzerland. Faroe Islands v Republic of Ireland. August 17 - Faroe Islands v Cyprus. France v Faroe Islands; Switzerland v Israel. Republic of Ireland v France; Cyprus v Switzerland; Faroe Islands v Israel. Switzerland v France; Israel v Faroe Islands; Cyprus v Republic of Ireland. France v Cyprus; Republic of Ireland v Switzerland.

Mutu to hold talks with Juventus

Mutu to hold talks with Juventus Disgraced former Chelsea striker Adrian Mutu is to begin talks with Juventus as he looks for a new club. "Mutu will be in our club's main stand to watch the match between Juventus and Fiorentina," said a Juventus official, who declined to be named. "Then he will meet some important people of the club," he added. Mutu, 25, sacked by Chelsea and banned for seven months for taking cocaine, is now represented by Alessandro Moggi, son of Juve manager Luciano Moggi. Mutu, banned by the English FA, can resume playing next May. He is to undergo a drug education and rehabilitation programme. Mutu wants to train with Romanian side Dinamo Bucharest whilst serving his ban, say the Bucharest side.

Diageo to buy US wine firm

Diageo to buy US wine firm Diageo, the world's biggest spirits company, has agreed to buy Californian wine company Chalone for \$260m (£134m) in an all-cash deal. Although Diageo's best-known brands include Smirnoff vodka and Guinness stout, it already has a US winemaking arm - Diageo Chateau & Estate Wines. Diageo said it expects to get US regulatory approval for the deal during the first quarter of 2005. It said Chalone would be integrated into its existing US wine business. "The US wine market represents a growth opportunity for Diageo, with favourable demographic and consumption trends," said Diageo North America president Ivan Menezes. In July, Diageo, which is listed on the London Stock Exchange, reported an annual turnover of £8.89bn, down from £9.28bn a year earlier. It blamed a weaker dollar for its lower turnover. In the year ending 31 December 2003, Chalone reported revenues of \$69.4m.

Tottenham bid £8m for Forest duo

Tottenham bid £8m for Forest duo Nottingham Forest have confirmed they have received an B£8m bid from Tottenham for Andy Reid and Michael Dawson. Reid rejected a move to Southampton after Forest accepted a cash-plus-players offer while Spurs had made previous bids for the 22-year-old. Spurs had also made an undisclosed offer for 21-year-old defender Dawson. Forest chief executive Mark Arthur said: "We've received an B£8m bid from Spurs for the two players and we're considering the offer." Southampton's offer for Republic of Ireland international Reid comprised B£3m-plus and two players - Brett Ormerod and Darren Kenton. Spurs had seen previous bids of B£3m, B£4m and B£5m for Reid rejected by the Championship club.

'Post-Christmas lull' in lending

'Post-Christmas lull' in lending UK mortgage lending showed a "post-Christmas lull" in January, indicating a slowing housing market, lenders have said. Both the Council of Mortgage Lenders (CML) and Building Society Association (BSA) said lending was down sharply. The CML said gross mortgage lending stood at B£17.9bn, compared with B£21.8bn in January last year. The BSA said mortgage approvals - loans approved but not yet made - were B£2bn, down from B£2.6bn in January 2004. At the same time, the British Bankers' Association (BBA) said lending was "weaker". Overall, the BBA said mortgage lending rose by B£4bn in January, a far smaller increase than the B£5.1bn seen in December. This was a return to the "weaker pattern" of lending seen in the last months of 2004, the BBA added. However, it is the year-on-year lending comparisons which are the most striking. The CML said lending for house purchases and gross mortgage lending were 29% and 18% lower year-on-year respectively. "These figures show beyond doubt the recent slowdown in the housing market," Peter Williams, CML deputy director, said.

Lufthansa flies back to profit

Lufthansa flies back to profit German airline Lufthansa has returned to profit in 2004 after posting huge losses in 2003. In a preliminary report, the airline announced net profits of 400m euros (\$527.61m; B£274.73m), compared with a loss of 984m euros in 2003. Operating profits were at 380m euros, ten times more than in 2003. Lufthansa was hit in 2003 by tough competition and a dip in demand following the Iraq war and the killer SARS virus. It was also hit by troubles at its US catering business. Last year, Lufthansa showed signs of recovery even as some European and US airlines were teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. The board of Lufthansa has recommended paying a 2004 dividend of 0.30 euros per share. In 2003, shareholders did not get a dividend. The company said that it will give all the details of its 2004 results on 23 March.

Quiksilver moves for Rossignol

Quiksilver moves for Rossignol Shares of Skis Rossignol, the world's largest ski-maker, have jumped as much as 15% on speculation that it will be bought by US surfwear firm Quiksilver. The owners of Rossignol, the Boix-Vives family, are said to be considering an offer from Quiksilver. Analysts believe other sporting goods companies may now take a closer look at Rossignol, prompting an auction and pushing the sale price higher. Nike and K2 have previously been mentioned as possible suitors. Rossignol shares touched 17.70 euros, before falling back to trade 7.8% higher at 16.60 euros. European sporting goods companies have seen foreign revenues squeezed by a slump in the value of the US dollar, making a takeover more attractive, analysts said. Companies such as Quiksilver would be able to cut costs by selling Rossignol skis through their shops, they added. The Boix-Vives family is thought to have spent the past couple of years sounding out possible suitors for Rossignol, which also makes golf equipment, snowboards and sports clothing.

Absa and Barclays talks continue

Absa and Barclays talks continue South Africa biggest retail bank Absa has said it is still in talks with UK bank Barclays over the sale of majority stake in the group. In November, Absa said it was close to striking a deal with Barclays. But the group said Barclays is still waiting for the approval of South Africa's banking and competition authorities to make a formal offer. Absa also announced that it expects to see earnings grow by 20-25% in its current financial year. "Discussions with Barclays are continuing, but shareholders are advised that no agreement has been reached as to any offer being made by Barclays to acquire a majority stake in Absa," Absa said

in a statement. If Barclays buys a stake in Absa it will be one of the largest foreign investments in South Africa in recent years. Absa currently has a market value of about \$8.5bn (B£4.4bn). Analysts said Absa's earnings forecast was better than expected. However, the company warned that headline earnings growth would be trimmed by about four percentage points because of share options for a black economic empowerment transaction and a staff share incentive scheme. The South African group will release its results for the year to 31 March on 30 May.

Burren awarded Egyptian contracts

Burren awarded Egyptian contracts British energy firm Burren Energy has been awarded two potentially lucrative oil exploration contracts in Egypt. The company successfully bid for the two contracts, granted by government owned oil firms, covering onshore and offshore areas in the Gulf of Suez. Burren Energy already has a presence in Egypt, having been awarded an exploration contract last year. The firm, which floated in 2003, recently announced a deal to buy 26% of Indian firm Hindustan Oil Exploration. The B£13.8m deal gives Burren Energy access to the Indian oil and gas industry. This latest contract expands Burren Energy's global exploration and production portfolio - it also holds contracts in Turkmenistan and the Republic of Congo. "These assets significantly increase our exploration portfolio in Egypt and we continue to investigate further opportunities in this region," said chief executive Finian O'Sullivan.

Durex maker SSL awaits firm bid

Durex maker SSL awaits firm bid UK condom maker SSL International has refused to comment on reports it may be subject to a takeover early in 2005. A Financial Times report said business intelligence firm GPW was understood to be starting due diligence work on SSL International, for a corporate client. An spokesman for SSL, which makes the famous Durex brand of condom, would not to comment on "market speculation". However the news sent shares in SSL, which also makes Scholl footwear, up more than 6%, or 16.75 pence to 293.5p. The FT said most the high-profile firm that might woo SSL was Anglo-Dutch household products group Reckitt Benckiser. Eighteen months ago Reckitt Benckiser was at the centre of a rumoured takeover bid for SSL - but that came to nothing. Other firms that have been seen as would-be suitors include Kimberly-Clark, Johnson & Johnson, and private equity investors. Analysts have seen SSL as a takeover target for years. It sold off its surgical gloves and antiseptics businesses for B£173m to a management team in May. SSL was formed by a three-way merger between Seton Healthcare, footwear specialists Scholl and condom-maker London International Group. Its other brands include Syndol analgesic, Meltus cough medicine, Sauber compression hosiery and deodorant products, and Mister Baby.

Britannia members' B£42m windfall

Britannia members' B£42m windfall More than 800,000 Britannia Building Society members are to receive a profit share worth on average B£52 each. Members of the UK's second largest building society will share B£42m, with 100,000 receiving a windfall of more than B£100. Depending on how much they borrow or invest, members earn "reward" points which entitle them to a share of the society's profits. The payouts are bigger than last year, because of stricter eligibility rules. Last year, Britannia members shared B£42m, but the average payment was only B£38. To qualify for this year's payment, customers must have been members for at least two years on 31 December 2004. Britannia has also stopped making payments to members if they are worth less than B£5. To qualify for the profit share, members must have either a mortgage, or an investment account other than a deposit account. Customers can also qualify if they have Permanent Interest Bearing Shares (PIBS). The profit share scheme was introduced in 1997 and has paid out more than B£370m. Britannia will unveil its results on Wednesday.

Ivanovic seals Canberra victory

Ivanovic seals Canberra victory Serbia's Ana Ivanovic captured her first WTA title with a straight-sets victory over Hungarian Melinda Czink in the final of the Canberra Classic. The 17-year-old took 83 minutes to take the match 7-5 6-1. Ivanovic beat Czink in the last round of qualifying but the Hungarian made the main draw as a lucky loser after Katarina Srebotnik withdrew injured. Ivanovic said: "I was really nervous in the beginning, but I pulled through and didn't do too much wrong." A junior Wimbledon finalist last year, she added: "It's my first WTA title, and to win it has really given me more energy to practice and improve." Ivanovic will play 32nd seed Iveta Benesova of the Czech Republic in the first round.said of the Australian Open in Melbourne.

Malaysia lifts Islamic bank limit

Malaysia lifts Islamic bank limit Malaysia's central bank is to relax restrictions on foreign ownership to encourage Islamic banking. Banks in Malaysia will now be able to sell up to 49% of their Islamic banking units, while the limit on other kinds of bank remains at 30%. RHB, Malaysia's third-biggest lender, is already scouting for a foreign partner for its new Islamic banking unit, the firm told Reuters. The moves put Malaysia ahead of a 2007 deadline to open up the sector. The country's deal to join the World Trade Organisation set that year as a deadline for liberalisation of Islamic banking. Also on Tuesday, the central bank released growth figures showing Malaysia's economy expanded 7.1% in 2004. But growth slowed sharply in the fourth quarter to 5.6%, and the central bank said it expected 6% expansion in 2005. Malaysia changed the law to allow Islamic banking in 1983. It has granted licences to three Middle Eastern groups, which - along with local players - mean there are eight fully-operational Islamic banking groups in the country. Islamic banks offer services which permit modern banking principles while sticking to Islamic law's ban on the payment of interest. Most of the Malays which make up half the country's population are Muslims.

Palace threat over Cantona masks

Palace threat over Cantona masks Manchester United fans wearing Eric Cantona masks will not be allowed in Selhurst Park on Saturday. United fans are planning to mark the 10th anniversary of Cantona's infamous kung-fu kick on Crystal Palace fan Matthew Simmons by wearing the masks. But Palace stadium manager Kevin Corner has warned: "If they wear them inside Selhurst Park they will be immediately rejected on safety grounds. "And no fans wearing Cantona masks will be allowed entry to the stadium." United fans had declared Saturday as 'Cantona Day' and had planned to wear masks, that were popular during the Frenchman's time as a player at the Old Trafford club. Cantona received a nine-month ban following the incident and Palace are keen to avoid an incident that would stir up ill feeling between the two sets of supporters. Four months after the Cantona incident a Palace fan, Paul Nixon, was killed prior to an FA Cup semi-final at Villa Park.

Klinsmann issues Lehmann warning

Klinsmann issues Lehmann warning Germany coach Jurgen Klinsmann has warned goalkeeper Jens Lehmann he may have to quit Arsenal to keep his World Cup dreams alive. Lehmann is understudy to Oliver Kahn in the German squad, but has lost his place to Manuel Alumnia at Highbury. Klinsmann said: "It will be difficult for any of our players if he is not a first-choice at his club. "If Jens is not Arsenal's number one keeper, that is a problem for me. He must be playing regularly." Lehmann is desperate to keep his place in the Germany squad when the country hosts the World Cup in 2006. Klinsmann added: "If he is not playing regularly he cannot be Germany's number one keeper, or even number two keeper. "The situation for Jens is that he is currently the number two keeper at Arsenal. This could be critical if it remains the same during next season."

Curbishley delight for Johansson

Curbishley delight for Johansson Charlton manager Alan Curbishley paid tribute to two-goal striker Jonatan Johansson after beating Norwich. Curbishley said after the 4-0 win: "There was talk about Norwich being interested in the summer but I have a lot of faith in Jonatan. "When there was talk of other clubs I just told him he was going nowhere. "He's part of our squad and he got us a couple of important goals early on. I'm sure he's happy here, but I was delighted with all the players." Curbishley was subjected to criticism from Charlton fans recently, and he said: "The thing about this club is that we have got where we are by all pulling in the same direction. "That's happened for however long I've been here and we don't want people taking sides."

Commodore finds new lease of life

Commodore finds new lease of life The once-famous Commodore computer brand could be resurrected after being bought by a US-based digital music distributor. New owner Yeahronimo Media Ventures has not ruled out the possibility of a new breed of Commodore computers. It also plans to develop a "worldwide entertainment concept" with the brand, although details are not yet known. The groundbreaking Commodore 64 computer elicits fond memories for those who owned one back in the 1980s. In the chronology of home computing, Commodore was one of the pioneers. The Commodore 64, launched in 1982, was one of the first

affordable home PCs. It was followed a few years later by the Amiga. The Commodore 64 sold more than any other single computer system, even to this day. The brand languished somewhat in the 1990s. Commodore International filed for bankruptcy in 1994 and was sold to Dutch firm Tulip Computers. In the late 1980s the firm was a great rival to Atari, which produced its own range of home computers and is now a brand of video games, formerly known as Infogrames. Tulip Computers sold several products under the Commodore name, including portable USB storage devices and digital music players. It had planned to relaunch the brand, following an upsurge of nostalgia for 1980s-era games. Commodore 64 enthusiasts have written emulators for Windows PC, Apple Mac and even PDAs so that the original Commodore games can be still run. The sale of Commodore is expected to be complete in three weeks in a deal worth over B£17m.

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European losses hit GM's profits

European losses hit GM's profits General Motors (GM) saw its net profits fall 37% in the last quarter of 2004, as it continued to be hit by losses at its European operations. The US giant earned \$630m (B£481.5m) in the October-to-December period, down from \$1bn in the fourth quarter of 2003. GM's revenues rose 4.7% to \$51.2bn from \$48.8bn a year earlier. The fourth-quarter losses at General Motors Europe totalled \$345m, up from \$66m during the same period in 2003. GM's main European brands are Opel and Vauxhall. Excluding special items, GM's global income from continuing operations totalled \$569m during the quarter, down from \$838m a year earlier. The results were in line with Wall Street expectations and shares in GM rose by about 1% in pre-market trade. For the whole of 2004, GM earned \$3.7bn, down from \$3.8bn in 2003, while its annual revenue rose 4.5% to \$193bn. GM said its profits were also hit by higher healthcare costs in the US. "GM reported solid overall results in 2004, despite challenging competitive conditions in many markets around the globe," GM chairman and chief executive Rick Wagoner said in a statement. The company recently announced that it expected profits in 2005 to be lower than in 2004.

Two Nigerian banks set to merge

Two Nigerian banks set to merge Nigerian banks United Bank of Africa and Standard Trust Bank have agreed plans to merge and create the biggest bank in West Africa. The deal is also in line with a 2004 directive from the Nigerian central bank that called for more consolidation in the nation's crowded banking sector. The merger was announced in a statement on Standard Trust's website on Tuesday, but no financial details were revealed. United Bank is the third biggest in Nigeria in terms of number of branches. Standard Trust is smaller but more profitable. "The boards of United Bank and Standard Trust, at separate meetings yesterday, approved arrangements to merge both institutions," Standard Trust said. Standard Trust is 100% Nigerian-owned, but United Bank has some foreign investors, including New York-based Global Depository Receipts (32.8%), and Banca Nazionale del Lavoro and Monte del Paschi di Siena, both from Italy, who each have a 2.4% stake.

