

Hewitt's prep hampered

AFP, Sydney

A knee injury is hampering Australian Lleyton Hewitt's preparations for this month's US Open, reports said here Friday.

The former US Open champion retired from a second-round match at the Toronto Masters Wednesday when trailing Sweden's Thomas Johansson 3-6, 2-3.

Hewitt said he had scans of the knee after experiencing problems following his previous round win over Argentina's Juan Ignacio Chela.

The former world No. 1 remains in doubt for the Cincinnati Masters next week ahead of the August 28 start to the US Open in New York.

"I've been getting treatment every day. Last night it just flared up again," Hewitt was quoted as saying in the Daily Telegraph here.

"I could hardly walk this morning when I got out of bed.

"When these things pop up, you've got to look at ways to best prepare yourself as well as possible in the circumstances for the grand slams. That's obviously the US Open in two and a half weeks."

His manager Rob Aivatoglou said Hewitt was not in doubt for the US Open "at this stage."

"But it's a bit hard to know when you haven't got any (scan) results," Aivatoglou said here Friday.

"He's had some tests and they did a scan. They'll let us know the results of those tests hopefully in the next day or so."

The injury also clouds Hewitt's potential availability for Australia's Davis Cup semi-final against Argentina in Buenos Aires in September.

Hewitt has yet to commit to the September 22-24 tie, citing security worries.

Argentina Davis Cup captain Alberto Mancini has shrugged off Hewitt's fears, saying he believes Hewitt is playing mind games.

"We've never had a security or any other type of problem with visiting players and we don't need to do anything different from what we've been doing up until now. I think he's exaggerating his worries," Mancini said Wednesday.

Hewitt is reviled in Argentina after a series of clashes with Argentine players.



PHOTO: AFP

Serena Williams of USA plays a backhand return to Daniela Hantuchova of Slovakia on Day 4 of the JPMorgan Chase Open at the Home Depot Center in Carson, California on Thursday.

Revenge sweet for Serena



AFP, Los Angeles

Serena Williams avenged her Australian Open loss to Daniela Hantuchova here Thursday with a 1-6, 6-3, 6-3 victory over the seventh-seeded Slovakian to reach the quarterfinals of a WTA hardcourt tournament.

While Williams had to rally to ease the sting of that defeat in Melbourne, top-seeded Russian Maria Sharapova rolled into the quarters to set up her own grudge match against the woman who ousted her from the French Open -- fifth-seeded compatriot Dinara Safina.

Williams, a seven-time Grand Slam champion, who was dethroned by Hantuchova in the third round in Australia, spent the next six months on the sidelines nursing a nagging knee injury.

She reached the semifinals in her comeback tournament in Cincinnati three weeks ago, but looked headed for an earlier exit in an error-strewn first set against Hantuchova.

"That was definitely a nightmare," Williams said. "But I never felt that I was out of it. I just felt like I was making some errors."

"I just thought, 'Serena, you've got to play better.'"

Williams didn't win a game until she held serve in the sixth game, in which she also fell heavily as she lunged for a forehand.

After Hantuchova wrapped up the set -- when a ball off the net cord fell her way -- Williams called for the trainer

and had her left ankle taped in an injury timeout.

Hantuchova wasn't convinced Williams was hurting, particularly since she thought the American's movement improved as the match progressed.

"I don't think so, no," Hantuchova said. "But that's her call."

Williams called that remark childish.

"I obviously fell," she said. "I obviously was injured... It was throbbing and it stung, but I just kept moving."

Williams dropped her serve to open the second set, but Hantuchova missed out on a chance to consolidate her advantage when she failed to convert two game points and was broken in the net.

Williams broke her again on her way to evening the match.

In the third, neither player faced a break point until the seventh game, when Williams converted her third opportunity when Hantuchova sailed a backhand long.

Williams fought off a break point in the next game, then broke again to take the match when Hantuchova sent a forehand over the line.

"I always had the chances to finish the point and maybe aimed it too much at the lines," Hantuchova said. "I have to give her the credit for the way she was serving, though. She hit some big serves on important points."

Hantuchova said Williams was much improved since their meeting in January.

"She's moving much better and serving really, really well," she said. "She just needs a few matches to be 100 percent back."

In the quarterfinals, Williams will

meet Meghann Shaughnessy, a 6-3, 6-3 winner over Spain's Virginia Ruano Pascual.

Sharapova swept into the last eight with a 6-1, 6-2 win over over-matched Frenchwoman Marion Bartoli, while Safina advanced with a 6-2, 7-6 win over American Laura Granville.

Sharapova said she wouldn't be dwelling on her Roland Garros disappointment.

"I'm not going to look back," she said. "Tomorrow is going to be a new match."

This time, Sharapova has momentum on her side. The 19-year-old took a month off after falling in the Wimbledon semi-finals, and returned last week to lift the title in San Diego.

"I am playing well," Sharapova said. "It's up to me to see how long I can keep going mentally and physically. I've played seven matches I haven't done that in a while."

Third-seeded Russian Elena Dementieva settled a score Thursday, downing Israel's Shahar Peer 7-5, 6-3.

Peer had beaten Dementieva in the third round at Roland Garros. Dementieva next faces US wild-card Bethanie Mattek, a 6-1, 6-1 winner of Ukrainian Alona Bondarenko.

Ana Ivanovic set up an all-Serbian clash with Jelena Jankovic with a 6-1, 6-4 upset of sixth-seeded German Anna-Lena Groenefeld. Jankovic beat Australian Samantha Stosur 6-4, 6-1.

Top guns line up for China Open

AFP, Beijing

Defending men's champion Rafael Nadal of Spain and women's world number one Amelia Mauresmo will lead a strong field at next month's China Open, state press reported on Friday.

Four of the world's top 10 men and six of the top women players have signed up for the September 11-24 tournament at the Beijing International Tennis Center, the China Daily reported.

Nadal, the world number two, will be joined by number three ranked David Nalbandian from Argentina and Russia's Nikolay Davydenko, ranked five.

Croatia's Mario Ancic, Spaniard David Ferrer and Germany's Nicolas Pietrangeli will also compete for the title.

In the women's competition, Frenchwoman and Wimbledon champion Mauresmo will face strong competition from Belgian world number three Justine Henin-Hardenne and Russians Nadia Petrova and Svetlana Kuznetsova, who are also both ranked in the top 10.

Local fans will pin their hopes on Li Na, ranked number 22, who became the first Chinese to reach a quarterfinal of a grand slam with her run at Wimbledon.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Juventus forward Alessandro Del Piero arrives for a team training session at Vinovo, northern Italy, on Friday. The Italy forward has remained faithful to the Old Lady despite their relegation to Serie B.

Henry resigned to losing Cole

THE GUARDIAN



PHOTO: AFP

Thierry Henry has toiled on the telephone with daily calls aimed at persuading Ashley Cole to reject Chelsea's overtures and commit himself to Arsenal just as he himself did when Barcelona sought his signature last season. Though the Arsenal captain's entreaties have apparently been in vain, there are no hard feelings. Indeed, Henry even attempted to persuade his club's faithful to adopt a similarly enlightened view of the England left-back.

"Seeing him going to Chelsea is kind of strange but after that, if he goes there, I will still speak to him, I will still phone him, I will still have a laugh with him," said Henry with a note of resignation. "Ashley is amazing. I can talk about Ashley for a long time. You can go to any place with Ashley Cole, he will always give you 100%. He is a top man."

"I won't only miss Ashley Cole as a good player, one of the best left-backs in the world, I will miss him as a friend, I will miss him as a guy to hang around with. That is my point, the whole thing about him leaving, it's not just about missing the player, he's a great guy."

"I think sometimes people have a view on Ashley Cole that doesn't reflect the guy he is. I say this from the bottom of my heart. The way I know Ashley Cole, he is a very honest, genuine guy. If he's playing well, that's what people should concentrate on. People sometimes have the wrong idea about Ashley Cole."

Even a sermon from the man they regard as messianic to their

club is unlikely to alter the opinions of Arsenal's seething stands. But it is illuminating that Henry, after making so public a commitment to the club last season despite the pangs he felt at the departure from Highbury for Ashburton Grove, feels no sense of betrayal from his team-mate. Conversely, indeed, the Frenchman feels Cole's departure, added to those of Dennis Bergkamp, Sol Campbell and Robert Pires this summer offers an opportunity for the Gunners. "Definitely there is something new starting," said Henry. "It is a fact that we won't be playing at Highbury so something is going to start, even in terms of the team, with all the people who have left."

"I think I, with Freddie [Ljungberg] and Lauren, we played with the other guys for a long time. Dennis, Sol, Robert have left and the years before, people have left so in every way, it is a new beginning."

The phrase "new beginning" takes particular import when compared with the watchword that Arsenal players used as a prologue to the last campaign. "Transitional" was the maxim they used to describe the Arsenal side following the departure of their captain Patrick Vieira.

The £13.75m sale of the France international destabilised the team psychologically to the extent that the Gunners had effectively lost the title by October. The team this year will not start as low as we were last year when Patrick left," said Henry. "That great run in the Champions League can only help because you saw we could do amazing stuff against amazing teams home and away. We finished the season well, from February to the end, we only lost away at Blackburn and Manchester United. We just did not start well at

all. "The team can build on that run, now people are more scared about Cesc [Fabregas], about Emmanuel Eboué, Lauren is going to come back. The like of Johan Djourou, they are in the national teams, Philippe Senderos too, Alex Hleb had to adapt in the Premiership and at the end of the season you saw he was way better than the beginning, Emmanuel Adebayor too. I just hope we can carry on like that, and then maybe when we are in trouble, we can say 'hang on, we did not do all that last year just by luck.'"

Henry is encouraged by the performance on Tuesday night in the 3-0 Champions League win at Dinamo Zagreb, which suggested Arsenal's young team retain the mettle required to impose themselves on a competition whose final they reached last season.

The France international, who was also a beaten finalist in this summer's World Cup, intends to see his club translate that into domestic pre-eminence not seen since the unbeaten season of 2004, regardless of Chelsea's looming shadow. "I never start something saying we are playing for second place," he said. "If you do, you might as well stop. Everyone knows when we are on tune we pass the ball well and it is difficult to play against us. Sometimes we need to dig in and have this mentality of playing as a team."

Henry has not been able to persuade Cole to stay, but he might just make him regret leaving.

No luck for Nadal



AFP, Toronto

World number one Roger Federer and British teen Andy Murray advanced to the quarterfinals of the ATP Masters Series event here Thursday but defending champion and second seed Rafael Nadal was ousted.

Reigning Australian Open and Wimbledon champion Federer fought off a challenge to beat Russia's Dmitry Tursunov 6-3, 5-7,

6-0 while Murray downed Spain's Carlos Moya 6-2, 6-4.

Spaniard Nadal lost to 14th-ranked Czech Tomas Berdych 6-1, 3-6, 6-2 in the biggest upset of the third round at the 2.5 million-dollar event, a warm-up for the US Open, the year's final Grand Slam tournament.

Federer dropped a set to Tursunov, a finalist at Los Angeles two weeks ago, but dominated the third set to make it clear he remains the man to beat.

"I thought the match was a good standard," Federer said. "I had my

opportunities to win the first set more easily. He hung in there. That was a sign of confidence. I stayed tough in the third set and won it."

The Swiss star said his rhythm was thrown off when he tried to disrupt Tursunov in the second set. "I broke my own rhythm doing that," Federer said. "I have to be a little more focused on what I'm doing."

Federer advanced to a Friday matchup with Belgian Xavier Malisse, who eliminated Sweden's Thomas Johansson, 7-6 (9/7), 6-3.

By eliminating French Open champion and Wimbledon runner-up Nadal, 20-year-old Berdych booked a date with Frenchman Richard Gasquet, who defeated Spain's Fernando Verdasco 6-0, 4-6, 6-2.

"I was playing one of my best matches," Berdych said. "I was almost perfect. I was putting pressure on Nadal."

Murray, in his second week working with new coach Brad Gilbert, dominated his Spanish foe but struggled when serving for the match before claiming the second set.

"It was one of those things," Murray said. "I've never had a problem with it before. It must just be Toronto."

Murray said tactics and strategy have been the main areas where Gilbert has helped him improve, saying there was too little time to work on other areas of his game before the US Open, which begins later this month.

"The game plans have been really good and I've played well," Murray said. "I thought I took the game too much to him pretty well and was up there. I used my forehand pretty well."

Murray advanced to a quarter-final against Finland's Jarkko Nieminen, who ousted Italy's Davide Sanguinetti 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (10/8).

Chile's Fernando Gonzalez pulled the day's other shocker, defeating fourth seed Ivan Ljubicic of Croatia 6-4, 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/3).

He will face Jose Acasuso in an all South American quarterfinal after the Argentine player eliminated France's Julien Benneteau 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

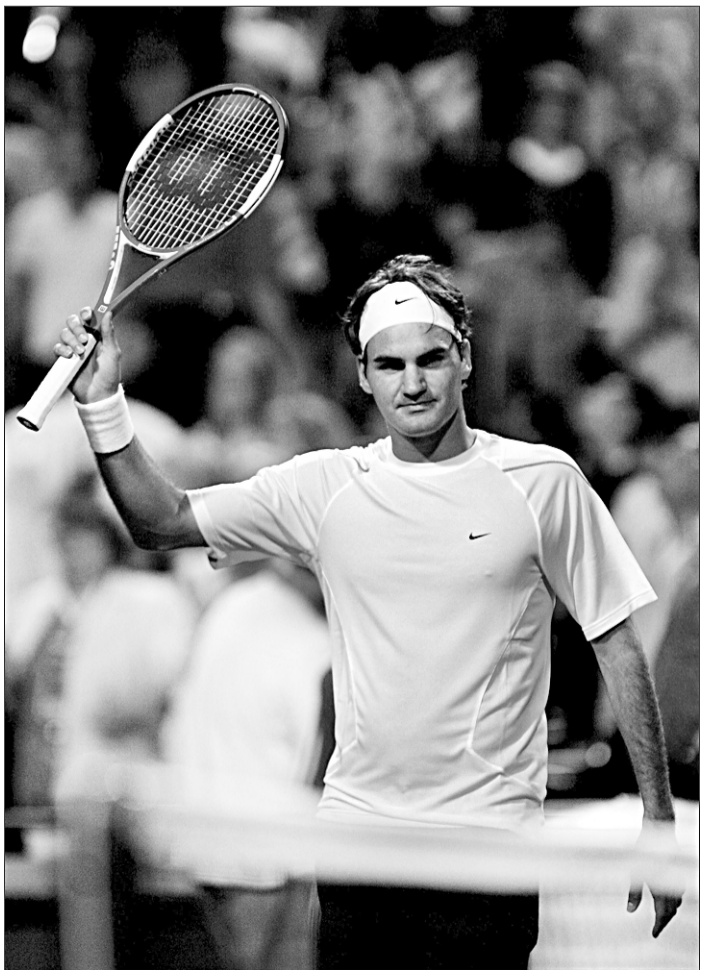


PHOTO: AFP

Swiss Roger Federer acknowledges the crowd after his win over Dmitry Tursunov of Russia during the Toronto Masters Series Rogers Cup in Toronto, Canada on Thursday.

End of the line

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John Terry was named as Beckham's successor as captain by McClaren.

"He has great hunger and desire to succeed and plays with great passion," McClaren said of the man he has entrusted to lead the team to the Euro 2008 finals in Austria and Switzerland.

Ayala desperate

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ple here. I want to solve this problem as soon as possible, but my head is no longer at this club."

Ayala, who was part of Argentina's World Cup squad, denied that his dispute with Valencia was over money.

"This is nothing to do with money," he said. "I feel well paid here at Valencia, but I feel cheated. I wanted to stay here until the end of my career but that dream had now disappeared because certain people did not keep their word."

Ayala joined Valencia from AC Milan in 2000 and has been the most influential player in the club's back four ever since.

He played a vital role in helping the club reach the Champions League final in 2001, win the Spanish league title in 2002 and win both the league and UEFA Cup in 2004.

The Argentine arrived late for training at the club after a visit to his home country last week and missed out on his side's 1-0 defeat to Salzburg in the third qualifying round of the Champions League.

Socceroos'

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coach until sometime next year.

"We have put it on hold for the time being, we are going to revisit the subject early to mid next year," O'Neill told ABC radio Friday.

"The market is a bit hot at the moment in terms of what coaches are asking, the sort of coach that we are looking to find to replace Guus Hiddink.

"There's a bit of a mad scramble and the chairman Frank Lowy and myself have pulled back."

Lowy has said he is committed to finding a top international coach to replace Hiddink, who is now in charge of Russia.

Australia's next Asian Cup qualifying match is against Kuwait in Sydney next Wednesday.

Senna misses

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chose the same players that I took to the World Cup because I have the same confidence in them as I did then," Aragones told a news conference on Friday.

After a promising start to the tournament, Spain were sent packing in the first knockout round after losing 3-1 to eventual finalists France.

Aragones explained that he had dropped Senna, who is reported to be on the verge of moving to Manchester United, because he had not played enough for Villarreal in their pre-season matches.

"He only played 20 minutes in a recent game and has had some little problems," the coach said.

Oubina made a vital contribution to Celta's impressive campaign last season which saw them finish in sixth place in the table on their return to the top flight.

"We wanted to see Oubina because he is certain to be with us next year," said Aragones.

Skipper Raul kept his place despite a disappointing World Cup and will win his 100th cap if he plays in Tuesday's match.

As well as next week's friendly, Spain will also meet Iceland in qualifying for Euro 2008 in March and September of next year.

Spain open their qualifying campaign with games against Liechtenstein and Northern Ireland at the start of September. Denmark, Sweden and Latvia are their other opponents in Group F.

John's plan irks Warne



AFP, Sydney

Champion leg-spin bowler Shane Warne has queried the timing of the Australian cricket team's pre-Ashes training camp in outback Queensland later this month which conflicts with his commitments with English county Hampshire.

Warne has reluctantly agreed to return home from England for the three-day "boot" camp, devised by national coach John Buchanan ahead of November's home Ashes series with England.

But Warne indicated he was not keen on returning to Australia this month while Hampshire is in the running for the English county championship.

"The Ashes will not start until November 23, it is three months away until the Ashes start so it is early, very early for a camp, but that is what John wants to do," Warne told Channel Nine Friday.

"I think it is one of John Buchanan's wonderful, mastermind things that keeps everyone stumped ... and, well, who knows, we all have to be there," Warne quipped.

Australia's campaign to regain the Ashes, lost in England last year, gets underway in Brisbane on

November 23 but before then the national one-day side, without Warne, is set to play a tournament in Malaysia and Singapore next month before October's Champions Trophy in India.

The training camp will be the first time the Australian team have been together since April's tour of Bangladesh.

Warne told The Guardian newspaper in London this week that he was likely to miss two of his first-placed team's remaining five first-division matches if he attended the camp.

But Cricket Australia wants all contracted players to be at the camp, which would force Warne to miss Hampshire's matches against fifth-placed Warwickshire and second-placed Sussex.

The world's top Test wicket-taker, leading Hampshire's bid for a first championship title in 33 years, wants to be back in England to face Sussex on August 31.

"Realistically, I'm asking that I can be released early and get back for Sussex," Warne told The Guardian.

"Of the two it's preferable that I miss Warwickshire."

Buchanan hopes the camp will help Australian squad members shut out the distractions that put them off their game in England last year.

The details of the outback training camp are secret but Buchanan said it was the first chance since he took over as coach in 1999 for all 25 contracted players to come together for a substantial bonding session because of the rare, extended break between overseas tours.

"The underlying philosophy is about taking all of us outside our comfort zone and then seeing how we respond to that, individually and collectively," he said Friday.

"The means to get there is secretive and that's where it remains."

Real active

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this his fourth season at the club.

Marca daily, meanwhile, reported that Real are in talks with Mexican side Atlas to sign Andres Guardado for their nursery side Castilla for a two-year loan with an option to buy. The Mexicans want four million euros for Guardado.

AS meanwhile said that if French champions Lyon do lose Diarra to the Bernabeu they will seek to replace him with Lens midfielder Alou Diarra, said to be a target for Roma.

Obikwelu's double delight

AFP, Gothenburg

Portugal's Francis Obikwelu was crowned European sprint king here Thursday after winning the 200m to add to his 100m title.

It was the first sprint double in 28 years, and there was no doubt over who was going to win after the Nigerian-born sprinter rounded the home bend two metres clear.

Obikwelu, who has held Portuguese nationality since 2001, steamed home in 20.01sec, with surprise package Johan Wissman of Sweden taking silver 0.37sec off the pace. Briton Marlon Devonish claimed bronze in 20.54sec.

For once, Obikwelu -- who won the 200m silver medal four years ago -- had a decent start, and left his rivals for dead over the opening 40 metres.

"I didn't have a single doubt that I was going to be today's winner," said Obikwelu.

"I have been waiting for this gold medal for four years and now I am double European champion -- I don't know how to express my feelings," the Olympic 100m silver medalist said in reference to the first sprint double since Italy's Pietro Mennea achieved the feat in 1978.

Aside from Obikwelu's heroics, the fourth day of the week-long competition saw Russia consolidate their position at the top of the medals table, netting two gold, two silver and two bronze medals.

On the track, Periklis Iakovakis won Greece's first gold, dominating the field in the men's 400m hurdles to win in 48.46sec.

"I came here as the favourite. I was the best and as I proved today I am the best," said the Greek air force officer.

Newcastle

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Marseille's lead two minutes before the break but Joao Paulo brought the Swiss side level.

Niang scored his second in the 57th minute to make it 3-2 before Brazil's Marcos dos Santos gave Young Boys a share of the spoils.

Marseille had Taye Ismaila Taiwo red-carded after just five minutes and then were reduced to nine players when Zubar was also sent-off in the 70th minute.

Ribery came on in the 68th minute for his first match since playing in the World Cup final.

"I'm happy to be here," said Ribery. "I hope we are going to have a good season at Marseille. The most important thing is that we finish in the three top places to qualify for the Champions League."

"I'm happy to have come here this evening. It wasn't easy."

Marseille have insisted that they intend to hang onto Ribery until the end of his contract which runs until 2010.