

FED CUP  
Italy draw  
first blood

REUTERS, Charleroi

Italy's Francesca Schiavone powered past Belgium's Kirsten Flipkens 6-1 6-3 on Saturday to take the opening match of the Fed Cup final on Saturday.

Despite a revival by Flipkens in the second set, the Italian, ranked 14th in the world, made easy work of her 98th ranked opponent to win in just over an hour.

Italy are playing in their first Fed Cup final while the Belgians are hoping to add to the only other title they won in 2001.

Schiavone raced to a 3-0 lead in the opening set, breaking the Belgian's serve twice. Flipkens continuously over-hit her forehand and was unable to make a decisive shot.

Flipkens recovered to break Schiavone's serve in the sixth game before holding three match points. She eventually succumbed to the Italian who took the opening set in just 23 minutes.

The second set was similar to the first, with Flipkens again finding herself 5-0 down before winning her first game. But this time she managed to break the Italian's serve in the next game to mount a mini-fightback which had the home crowd on its feet.

The home player won her service game and had two break points in the following game, but Schiavone managed to find her form again to take the match.

World number two Justine Henin-Hardenne will aim to get the home team back in contention later on Saturday when she faces Flavia Pennetta in the second match of the day.



PHOTO: INTERNET  
Hanover forward Thomas Brdaric (L) slaps a high five with teammate Jacek Krzynowek after the former scored in their Bundesliga clash at Wolfsburg on Friday.

Hanover claim  
first points

REUTERS, Berlin

Hanover 96 finally got off the mark in the Bundesliga when Thomas Brdaric struck twice to earn them a 2-1 derby win away to VfL Wolfsburg on Friday.

Hanover went into the game in bottom place without a point from their first three games but a change in coach, with Dieter Hecking coming into replace Peter Neururer, brought an immediate upswing in their league form.

Brdaric put Hanover ahead in the 51st minute with a great shot on the turn from the left of the area, after Dutch midfielder Arnold Bruggink had flicked on a long ball.

Wolfsburg equalised in a matter of seconds, as Mike Hanke picked out Jacek Krzynowek to send in a flashing shot from the edge of the area, but Hanover were back in front by the 61st minute, when Brdaric tapped in a cross from Jiri Stajner.

The result leaves Hanover and Wolfsburg each with three points from four games.

Nuremberg, Bayern Munich and Schalke 04 are the league leaders going into the fourth round of matches with seven points apiece.

The World Cup of hope

Football

REUTERS, London

There was not much to link between former Liberian child soldiers and a destitute Scot, the editor of a Russian street paper and a Manchester United coach -- until the Homeless World Cup.

After months of team trials, travel and training, homeless men and women from around the globe will battle it out in Cape Town from Sept. 23-30 in an annual tournament which for many could become a gateway to a job, a home and new friends.

The United Nations estimates there are more than 100 million homeless people worldwide and more than one billion live in inadequate housing in shanty towns or without basic utilities.

The British-based organisers of the HWC, which stages a shorter version of conventional soccer matches in smaller all-male, all-female or mixed teams, say the participating homeless and asylum seekers gain the necessary confidence and self-esteem to turn their fortunes around.

"I was staying in supported accommodation and nothing was really going for me. I turned up and made it into the Scottish team," said David Duke, 26, who took part in HWC 2004 and played soccer competitively when he was younger.

"And then from there I used it to get back into football and coaching. It changed my life."

"Being homeless is probably the best thing that's happened to me, it's crazy but it has been," said Duke, who became homeless in 2003 when he lost his job and could not afford a rent.

After playing in the HWC, he decided to pursue a career in coaching and is now a certified youth coach. He is renting a home and trying to buy one of his own in Glasgow.

Having previously worked in garages and bars, Duke said: "I am doing something now that I enjoy."

"Football is the initial tool," he told Reuters. "In football, there's a lot of communication with others involved, fitness, meeting new people... winning games."

Duke's story illustrates recent findings by the organisers of the HWC tournaments.

Out of 217 players surveyed six months after last year's championship, 164 or 77 percent have either found a regular job, a better place to live or continued their education.

More than a half of those trying to combat an addiction succeeded and some, like Duke, now make their living partly as coaches or players.

An overwhelming majority of players have reported a new motivation for life.

"I probably wouldn't have stayed alive if I hadn't done something to my morale," said Arcady Tiurin, the 44-year-old editor of a Russian street paper who played in the last two HWC tournaments.

Formerly homeless, Tiurin now lives in a flatshare in St Petersburg but, lacking official registration in the city, is still considered an illegal resident.

So what exactly has changed? "I have changed. I now have in my life, besides work, another thing that no one can take away from me. It's called football."

It is hard to think of another sport or hobby that can have such a dramatic effect on a huge variety of people.

"There's an international language and that's football," said Mel Young, co-founder and president of HWC tournaments.

"It's very simple: it's a ball and a pitch. It's not expensive and you don't even have to have a football -- you can make one."

"You can play it anywhere. You can have two players a side or 20 players a side. You can be any standard," he told Reuters.

"For all these reasons, it's just this thing that has this magic."

The championship has swelled from 18 participating countries in its first year, 2003, to 48 teams expected in Cape Town and at least 10,000 homeless people are involved in pre-tournament trials and training this year.

"We were going to do a one-off event but it was such a success: the crowd was full, the football was really good and the media were fascinated but, most importantly, the homeless people were changing," Young said, adding that they were even asked for their autographs.

The competition for a place in the national team is fierce. In England, the squad is selected and trained by Manchester United coaches.

A new training project supported by HWC is aimed at selecting a national team from disadvantaged Liberians, many of them former soldiers, and organisers hope to get 200,000 players involved in the next two years.

"They put their guns down because they want to play football. Somebody gave them guns but they just want to play football," Young said.

After stiff competition, Copenhagen was chosen as the venue for the next HWC and Melbourne will host the 2008 tournament.

"I find it quite ironic," Young said. "They are always talking about homeless people being a problem and these cities are now fighting with each other to get these people to come."

Jose accepts Rafa truce

AFP, London

Jose Mourinho has accepted Rafael Benitez's offer of a truce in their long-running feud -- provided it is genuine.

The Chelsea boss admitted on Friday that relations between him and his Liverpool counterpart had become difficult and said he would be willing to shake hands after their two sides meet on Sunday, something which they have failed to do after the last two matches between the clubs.

"With the handshake, it depends," Mourinho said. "If it is not with feeling and is just for the camera, then I'm not ready for that."

"I don't care what people think or people say. I don't care about image. I care about human feelings. If the feeling is positive and we realise that in the past some comments shouldn't have been made, then I'm more than ready for that."

Mourinho's comments came after Benitez said earlier this week that it was time to end the unseemly spat which has seen the two men sniping at each other for much of the two years they have both spent in England.

Liverpool were widely tipped to be the team most likely to threaten Chelsea's bid for a hat-trick of Premiership titles.

But dropped points at Sheffield United and Everton mean they will be eight adrift of the champions if they lose on Sunday.

Mourinho however does not believe Liverpool will be out of the running if they are beaten at Stamford Bridge.

"It is only the beginning of the season but points are very important, especially for the teams coming from behind. If they lose again they start being in a difficult position but all four teams (Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester United and Arsenal) are better than last season."

"I don't believe that after Sunday a loser will say it's over for me, I have no more chance."

Mourinho has won all four of his league battles with Benitez and has never lost in the Premiership at Stamford Bridge.

"It is a great record but I'm not interested in just the record," Mourinho added. "I'm interested in getting points. If I draw 10 matches at home we will still have the unbeaten record but we lose 20 points."

"If you ask me if I prefer to keep the record with 10 draws, or take nine victories and one defeat, I prefer the defeat. I'm not chasing or defending records. We need points, points, points."

Ravaged Deisler  
steps up  
comeback

AFP, Munich

Injury-prone German international midfielder Sebastian Deisler is set to return to full training with German champions Bayern Munich after six months out with a serious knee injury.

"His return is not far away," Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said in Munich newspaper AZ.

"The fact that he has missed two World Cups is hard to take but he has made a good impression on me. The worst is now behind him."

The 26-year-old Deisler, capped 36 times by his country, missed this summer's World Cup in his homeland after sustaining a knee injury in March.

A knee injury also saw Deisler, once touted as the golden boy of German football, miss the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea.

Constant injury setbacks saw the gifted midfielder lapse into depression and in November 2003 he was first admitted to the Max-Planck-Institute for Psychiatry in Munich.

Deisler recovered and returned to the first team but then relapsed into depression in October last year ahead of a vital Champions League group match with Juventus.

I'm like Zizou'

Football

INTERNET, undated

Milan's Yoann Gourcuff says he's flattered to have been compared with Kaka, but insists he feels technically more similar to Zinedine Zidane.

The French youngster, nicknamed 'Petit Zidane', is the talk of the town after his Champions League heroics against AEK Athens and he's happy to have been given the opportunity to reveal himself.

"I have to thank Coach Carlo Ancelotti for giving me a spot in the starting line-up on Wednesday, it was a risk for him in such an important match and I am glad I repaid his trust with a goal," said the 20-year-old.

"It's an honour for me to hear that I am being compared to Kaka and Zidane, but I admit I feel that I play more like the latter as Kaka is much faster than me," continued the former Rennes man.

"I think Zidane is a great example as an athlete and as a person, with the exception of the World Cup Final episode. I just met him a few times, but was too shy to speak to him."

The midfielder, who still had a year left on his previous contract with Ligue 1 outfit Rennes, landed in Milan in the summer after signing a contract until June 30, 2011.

"I chose Milan for its history and what they represent in Europe and I am very glad about my move," he underlined.

"I am getting along well with my teammates, all of them, but I know that I need to keep my feet on the ground."

"There are so many high-quality players and it won't be easy to find place on the team," continued Gourcuff.

"I will keep on working hard in order to always be prepared if Ancelotti decides that it's time for me to play."



YOANN GOURCUFF

Ferguson's  
call to fans

REUTERS, London

Manager Alex Ferguson has accused half of Manchester United's fans of being asleep when they turn up for weekend matches at Old Trafford.

Ferguson's frustration follows a rousing atmosphere for their 3-2 midweek win over Celtic in the Champions League. It also precedes Sunday's high-profile home game with old foes Arsenal.

"I keep saying I wished every team could bring 6,000 fans with them like Celtic because it does create a competitive element between the fans," Ferguson was quoted as saying on the club's Web site on Friday.

"It created a far better atmosphere and our fans are better because of it. I think back to some of the great Wednesday nights -- electric. We need that more often."

"Some weekends they come here to be entranced, to see magic. Half of them are sleeping, waiting to be entertained."

"But we need their spirit to ignite the team at times. It should not always be the other way around. A fan can stir his team."

It was not the first time United fans have come in for criticism.

In 2000, former captain Roy Keane famously caricatured those in the corporate seats who "have a few drinks and some prawn sandwiches and don't realise what is going on out on the pitch."

Blatter to speed up  
2010 preparations

Football

AFP, Zurich

FIFA president Sepp Blatter said Friday that he will visit South Africa shortly to urge lawmakers to speed up building work for the 2010 World Cup, amid growing concern about delays.

Blatter said he would meet South African President Thabo Mbeki and make an appeal to the country's parliament "to explain the value of the World Cup and to fire up the organising committee, because it's the last moment to start building five stadiums."

"For the moment they have plans, money, and decisions, but I have yet to see the pickaxes and spades needed to start the work," he told journalists after a meeting of world governing body's executive committee.

A FIFA spokesman was unable to give a date for the planned visit by the delegation from world football's governing body.

Blatter hoped that the work would get underway before the end of the year, and said the South Africans had to be trusted.

The FIFA chief also advised the South Africans not to take up offers of help from British, French, German, or other experts involved in organising previous World Cups.

"If there are too many cooks, it spoils the broth," he commented.

Senior municipal officials in the nine cities which are to host the 2010 World Cup accused the South African government and lawmakers last month of hampering their preparations.

The officials told a parliamentary committee they were still in the dark about the amount of money they would receive for the tournament.

They also complained that legislation on tendering contracts threatened to derail their organisation efforts.

Ronaldinho  
close to  
new deal

INTERNET, undated

Ronaldinho is in the process of negotiating a 12-million-euro a year contract plus bonuses according to reports in Spain. The Brazil star's agent and brother, Roberto de Assis, has already travelled to Barcelona to negotiate the terms of his new deal.

The Barcelona forward, who currently earns 9 million plus bonuses, is contracted to the club until 2010.

Barcelona want him to commit to 2014, conscious of confirmed interest from Milan.

The agent wants a basic annual salary of 12 million plus performance-related bonuses, equalling the offer from suitors Milan, to which Barca will respond with a demand for a cut of the World Player of the Year's image rights.

Raul set to get  
the chop

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid captain Raul is set to be dropped for the club's weekend fixture against Real Sociedad after the team's abysmal showing in the 2-0 defeat to Lyon on Wednesday.

"Raul is not untouchable," coach Fabio Capello said last week. "In this team there are none guaranteed (a place). He is training well, but if things go wrong it will be necessary to turn to somebody else."

Capello is likely to pick Brazil international Robinho in the former talisman's place. Robinho excelled in Brazil's 3-0 win over Argentina recently and was one of the few shining lights in the nation's World Cup campaign.

The Spanish press have indicated that Raul may not be the only change for Sunday's match. Antonio Cassano and David Beckham were substituted alongside Raul in the Lyon match and could face the axe.

D-day for  
Gunners

AFP, Manchester

There can have been few title deciders as early as September between the two most successful clubs of the Premiership era.

But Arsenal travel to Old Trafford on Sunday knowing that their own hopes of title glory may be over for another year if they become the latest victims of Manchester United's flawless start to the season.

Remarkably, last season's Champions League finalists have yet to win in the league this campaign having drawn two and lost one of their three games and while United's four straight victories mark their best start to a Premiership season, Arsenal are experiencing their worst.

Injury doubts over talisman Thierry Henry, Dutch forward Robin van Persie and defender Kolo Toure ahead of the game only add to the sense that the fixture may have come too soon for the Gunners.

Manchester United-Arsenal encounters are rarely predictable, however, and Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is convinced that his players have the ability to claim their first Old Trafford victory since May 2002.

Wenger said: "We do not go there to lose, we go there to win and I am confident we have a good chance to do it."

"Let's focus on us and play at our best level and continue to do what we do and try to improve our defensive record. Then we have a good chance against United."

"The teams that have played against us so far in the Premiership refused to play and we made it even more difficult for ourselves by going behind in every game. We need some luck, perhaps, but I feel it will come and there is so much quality in our side and I'm sure that will make the difference."

"United have a good team, they've had a good start and those are always good ingredients to have a good season. But after four games it is too early. You need eight to 10 games to see what is the real strength of the team."

Recent meetings between the two sides have boiled over, with confrontations between the players on and off the pitch emphasising the animosity and competitiveness between the pair.

But while victory would leave United thirteen points clear of Wenger's team, Old Trafford midfielder Michael Carrick does not believe that defeat will end Arsenal's title hopes.

Carrick said: "It's too early in the day to be writing Arsenal off. If we win the game, we are in a strong position, but you cannot look too far ahead. Things will only be settled at the end of the season."

"Arsenal had a good result in midweek at Hamburg and will be confident going into the game, but Manchester United v Arsenal is always a huge game and, after the start we have had, we want to carry it on."

"Winning is a good habit to have and something we want to continue against Arsenal. It's a tough game, but confidence is high and we are picking up results."

"I wouldn't say that we have hit top gear yet, even if we have had a couple of fantastic performances, but we have won every game so it will be nice to see what we are like when we finally do hit top gear."

Injured duo Ji-Sung Park and Ryan Giggs miss out for United, but Wayne Rooney and Paul Scholes return to domestic action following three-match bans.

The German football association (DFB) fined Hansa Rostock's regional league side 20,000 euros (25,450 dollars) on Friday after their fans chanted racist slogans at Schalke 04 striker Gerald Asamoah in a recent German Cup match.

The DFB's sport court also ordered the third division east German club to play their next home match without any spectators because of the incidents in the match on Sept. 9, won 9-1 by Schalke. Racist chants aimed at Asamoah, a German international who immigrated to Germany from Ghana as a child, were chanted from the Rostock fan section in the first half.

"The reason for the punishment is the continued racist shouts aimed at Schalke's international player Gerald Asamoah," DFB spokesman Harald Stenger said in a statement.

The DFB said that Hansa Rostock accepted the ruling.

Racism has been in the spotlight in the eastern region.

In a state election in the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern on Sunday where Rostock is located, the far-right National Democratic Party (NPD) is set to win more than five percent of the vote and seats in the state assembly.

Wenger  
wants  
English  
values

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has hit out at foreign businessmen buying top English football clubs after rumours suggested Arsenal are the subject of a 350 million pounds (660.7 million dollars) buy-out bid by a Russian consortium.

Wenger told reporters on Friday he would rather Arsenal stay in the hands of its English owners than be given a 100 million pounds transfer budget by foreign backers.

Champions Chelsea, Manchester United, Aston Villa and Portsmouth have all been acquired by foreign investors.

"I would choose the status quo," he said. "I am happy with the owners I have and I do not see the need for a change because we are stable financially."

"If we were bankrupt maybe, but they have made a miracle by building a new stadium without being bankrupt."

"The club is doing very well and we have a very promising team, having just come out of the Champions League final. We have a team which is getting better and better."

"We had a stuttering start, but when you look overall at what we have done financially and in a sports way, I do not feel there is a need there for a change."

"The future of the club looks good."

Wenger questioned the integrity of foreign businessmen taking over Premier League clubs and believes English values need to thrive.

"What is so good is that we know what we do and why we do it," Wenger said.

"I feel it is important that English clubs have English values, and that it has not just become who spends more than anybody else."

"Until now, one of the charms of English football has been that fans created the clubs and controlled the clubs, that the owners are fans first."

"I said that until now it is a change of philosophy. I don't know what kind of implications it will have on English football."

"I find it more reassuring that my owners are English and they are, first, fans of Arsenal Football Club."

"I will go one day and the players will go one day but the owners will be the same. They are the people who really transmit the values."

"That is why I said a few years ago that I wanted (Chelsea owner) Roman Abramovich to come out and say what club he wanted to build."

"The people who are really responsible for the philosophy and continuity of the club are the owners."

"I don't know if it is good or bad but English football certainly has a question to ask at the moment on that front."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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CRYPTOQUIP

S V Z L Z O H K T T M E

E S F L S V S Q Z L Y K I K S M H P S E

U Z U U I , P H N S F P Y X H Z

Q P S N O T V V Y P H T K U X K T Q M .

Yesterday's Cryptiquip: BEFORE THE TWO HORSES GOT MARRIED, THE MARE GOT LOTS OF GIFTS AT HER BRIDLE SHOWER.

Today's Cryptiquip Clue: V equals F

The Cryptiquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.