Aussie Open begins today

MELBOURNE, Jan 15: Pete Sampras will be aiming for his sixth Grand Slam title Monday when he opens the defence of his Australian Open men's singles title against Italian baseliner Gianluca Pozzi, reports AP.

The American has won two Grand Slam tournaments in each of the past two years, firmly establishing himself as the world's top-ranked player ahead of Andre Agassi and Boris Becker.

Sampras' 10 titles last year included victories in the Australian Open and Wimbledon.

While there are nine former Grand Slam champions in a powerful men's draw, there is certain to be a new women's singles champion.

In the absence of Steffi Graf, who has won four times Down Under, and of three-time champion Monica Seles, there are no former title holders in the women's draw.

Sampras has experimented with a cap in a bid to reduce the impact of the notorious Melbourne sun and is happy with his form.

"My game is getting better and better. I'm ready to go," he said.

Fitness is a crucial factor at the National Tennis Centre, where the rubberised Rebound Ace courts are reputed to be the hottest in the world and the time permitted between points has been reduced from 25 to 20 seconds at Grand Slam tournaments in line with International Tennis Federation policy.

The men who have won Grand Slams include Sampras, US Open champion Agassi, Becker, two-time Australian Open winner Jim Courier, Michael Chang, Pat Cash, Stefan Edberg, Michael Stich and Mats Wilander.

Agassi, who has never previously played in the Australian Open, faces South African qualifier Grant Stafford in his first match of the 128-draw men's event on Tuesday.

Agassi has adapted to the Rebound Ace surface by playing in an exhibition in Adelaide. He say he's not thinking about challenging Sampras for the No. 1 ranking — or about winning the event.

"Pete's not my concern," he said. "My first-round match is my concern. I know it's a cliche, but I just want to take it one match at a time. You cannot afford to take anything for granted."

Becker faces the toughest first-round assignment of the big names — a meeting with American Patrick McEnroe, who on Saturday won the new South Wales Open in Sydney.

Courier is seeded ninth after a 16-month title drought but won the Australian hard-court title in Adelaide two weeks ago and brings a more relaxed personality to Melbourne. He opens against David Rikl of the Czech Republic.

Other potentially dangerous players include two-time Wimbledon finalist Goran Ivanisevic of Croatia, tall Dutchman Richard Krajicek, 1994 runner-up Todd Martin of the United States, Australian Pat Rafter and Grand Slam Cup winner Magnus Larsson of Sweden.

Chang has displayed the best form in the past week, beating Cash, Becker and then Sampras in the Colonial Classic exhibition, which is played on the same surface as the Open.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't give myself a chance of wining," said Chang, who only has played the Australian twice before and faces Australian wild card Paul Kilderry on Monday morning. "That's my aim. I'm here to try and win."

Becker withdrew from his last match at the Colonial Classic with a slight knee strain, but practiced enthusiastically Sunday without any apparent discomfort.

Arantxa-Sanchez Vicario can take over as the world's top-ranked woman if she wins in Melbourne. In the absence of Graf, a revitalised Gabriela Sabatini, France's Mary Pierce and Wimbledon champion Conchita Martinez loom as her main rivals.

Sabatini, who has promised so much but delivered little over the past few seasons, won the season-ending Virginia Slims Championship in New York and then defeated top-seeded American Lindsay Davenport to win the New South Wales Open final on Sunday.

"This is the most confident I've felt before a Grand Slam in a while," said Sabatini. "I feel more comfortable hitting the ball."

Sanchez Vicario, winner of the US and French Opens last year, says she is not feeling pressured by the prospect of taking over from Graf as No. 1.

"If I make it, that's great. If not, I'll keep on working," said the phlegmatic Spaniard.

Sanchez Vicario opens against Fang Li of China on Tuesday, while No. 2 seed Martinez faces German Barbara Rittner in her first-round match.

No.3 seed Jana Novotna of the Czech Republic plays Canadian Patricia Hy-Boulais and Pierce will play Tina Krizan of Slovenia.

The tournament, sponsored by Ford, offers prize money of US dlrs 6.2 million and continues through Jan. 29.

Agassi aims a repeat act

MELBOURNE, Jan 15: Tennis master illusionist Andre Agassi is threatening to perform the same trick he perfected at Wimbledon in 1992 when he makes his Australian Open debut this week, reports Reuter.

Then, as now, the world was fascinated with just about everything connected with Agassi, from his hair and clothes to his eating habits and love life, it scarely noticed his tennis until he held the trophy aloft on Centre Court.

The same is true this time and the Las Vegas showman is doing nothing to divert Australia's gaze. In fewer than three days in Melbourne he must have answered a hundred questions about his appearance and a mere handful on his form.

Yet there is no doubt Agassi is secretly working hard behind the scenes. Flying in by chartered jet from Adelaide on Friday for an advance look at Flinders Park was far from the jaunt it may have seemed at the time.

The US Open champion has played around the globe, but was prepared to listen to those who insisted Melbourne's unpredictable weather and enclosed Centre Court creates unique problems even for the top players.

Not all the advice whispered past Andre's earrings in previous years has been so informed. But everyone seems to agree that the enforced break Agassi took after wrist surgery in December 1993 has produced a more thoughtful player.

Boris Becker, at Agassi's shoulder in the push towards Pete Sampras world number one ranking, is in no doubt.

"He changed last year," said the German. "For many years in my opinion, he trained too

ANDRE AGASSI

little and didn't do enough with his talent. But starting with his operation, he thought about what he had to change to come back as a top tennis player. He started to train more, watch more closely what he ate and the results are there."

Sampras himself has singled out his compatriot as the most likely man to leap from the chasing pack. Leaving aside the jokes about his shaven head making him quicker around court, Agassi appears as motivated as at any time in his career.

"There's a certain amount of excitement not knowing what it's like," he admitted as he looked ahead to his first round match against South African Grant Stafford scheduled for Tuesday. "It's the same feeling as Wimbledon. I hope it's all it's cracked up to be."

Agassi took just five days off over the Christmas period, but otherwise devoted himself to training and practice with his coach Brad Gilbert, the man who persuaded him that talent alone was not enough to take him back to the top.

Training in the mid-afternoon heat on Friday, the 24-year-old looked sharp and insists a hot fortnight would be a help rather than a hindrance.

"I think the weather is suitable for me. My style usually means my opponents are working harder than I am which is nice when it's 100 degrees."

One person who won't be around to watch is the actress Brooke Shields, first to embrace Agassi after his US Open triumph last September.

She is currently playing the role of Rizzo in the Broadway production of Grease, which Agassi has reportedly seen 14 times. Melbourne audiences are hoping for similar entertainment from her boyfriend.

Keiyo wins Vietnam Marathon

HANOI, Jan 15: Phillip Keiyo, a corn farmer from the mountains of Kenya, sprinted past veteran British runner Hugh Jones 200 metres (yards) from the finish Sunday to win the fourth San Miguel Vietnam Marathon, reports AP.

"I'm not tired, here it's cool, just like Kenya," said Keiyo, 28, who gained his first international marathon victory in 2:22.22, just ahead of Jones 2:22.33.

In a sign of continuing improvement in US-Vietnam relations, the field included David Lambertson, US ambassador to Thailand. The United States and Vietnam don't yet have diplomatic relations, although a liaison office is due to open shortly.

Lambertson, 54, said he entered because he thought he was ready to try his first marathon. "Pretty good for an old guy," he said of his 3:25.09 time. "But I'm glad to be done with it."

The streets of Hanoi were lined with thousands of cheering spectators straining at police lines, especially when the racers poured through the narrow streets of the old quarter.

"The crowd was great, but I had some problems pacing myself because the distances weren't well posted," said Lucy Ramwell of Hong Kong, the leading woman finisher at 2:53.04.

Keiyo credited his coach, Ajai Tailor of Eitroet, Kenya, for his victory, and said the dlrs 6,000 prize was triple his annual income from his four-acre farm. He started training for marathons two years ago, and finished second last year in Bangkok in his only other try at the distance.

Jones, 35, said he tried to shake Keiyo throughout the race, "but he was treading down my heels the whole way. An old guy like me has to try to burn them off before the last kick, but I couldn't do it."

Third place went to Russian Mikhail Kokorev at 2:23.29. Doug Kurtis of Northville, Michigan, who won in 1993 and 1994, finished fourth in 2:37.00.

"I had to run within myself," said Kurtis, 42, who has won a record 37 marathons. Kurtis said he was bothered by Hanoi's typical winter humidity, despite the cool temperatures. "When they went, I just couldn't go with them."

The top Vietnamese finisher was Luu Van Hung, fifth at 2:37.05. Second place in the women's field went to Vu Thi Hoa in 3:01.45.

Kenyan Philip Keiyo, 28, crosses the finish line to win the Hanoi International Marathon '95 yesterday. Keiyo ran the 42.17 kms in 2 hrs 22 mins 22 secs — AFP photo

Rio welcomes Romario

RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 15: Soccer fans lined the streets of Rio de Janeiro and set off firecrackers as they welcomed back Brazilian international Romario on Saturday, reports Reuter.

"What made me come back? I hardly need an answer — look at the people out there," said Romario, who has returned to his beloved home city to play for Flamengo. The Rio club recruited him from Barcelona for 4.5 million dollar.

"Romario is football, he is our national passion, he is our king," enthused Augusto Novis, a 17 year-old student, one of 3,000 fans who braved the midday heat of a tropical summer's day to pack into Flamengo's training ground for a glimpse of their idol.

The stocky striker, sporting Flamengo's distinctive red and black hopped shirt, had travelled to the ground on top of a truck to the accompaniment of firecrackers and honking car horns.

On a stage inside the training ground beneath the gaze of Rio's famous Christ statue, Romario briefly beat on a drum along with a samba band while a helicopter showered red rose petals on the crowd.

"I am here to put Flamengo back where they belong," said "The little one" as he is affectionately known in Brazil.

Since winning the Brazilian Championship in 1992, Flamengo have sold many of their best players and, until now, failed to replace them.

Crowds as low as 3,000 often jeered the players and management during an unsuccessful 1994 season.

However, the election in December of businessmen Kleiber Leite as club president could mark a turnaround in the club's fortunes. He was kissed and hugged by fans almost as many times as Romario himself during the presentation of the player.

Leite persuaded several big Brazilian firms, including a leading bank, a beer company and owners of a huge shopping centre, to jointly buy Romario with Flamengo and help pay the 3 million dollar he has been guaranteed over the next two years.

In return, the companies will use Romario's image for advertising.

Flamengo are also interested in signing two other members of Brazil's 1994 World Cup winning side — skipper Dunga and Branco.

Vinny Pazienza punishes Duran

ATLANTIC CITY, New Jersey, Jan 15: Vinny Pazienza pounded former four-time world champion Roberto Duran throughout their 12-round super middleweight fight to earn a unanimous decision on Saturday, reports Reuter.

Pazienza, 32, was simply too young and too fast for the 43-year-old Panamanian, who was only a ghost of the fighter he was when he was the best lightweight in the world, probably ever.

The three judges scored the fight for the dubious International Boxing Council title 116-112, 117-111 and 118-110 for Pazienza.

Pazienza consistently landed combinations to the body and powerful left and right hooks to Duran's head.

Duran landed technically-perfect counter punches several times, but it was clear to everyone, even those way up in the cheap seats at the Atlantic City Convention Centre that they contained little power.

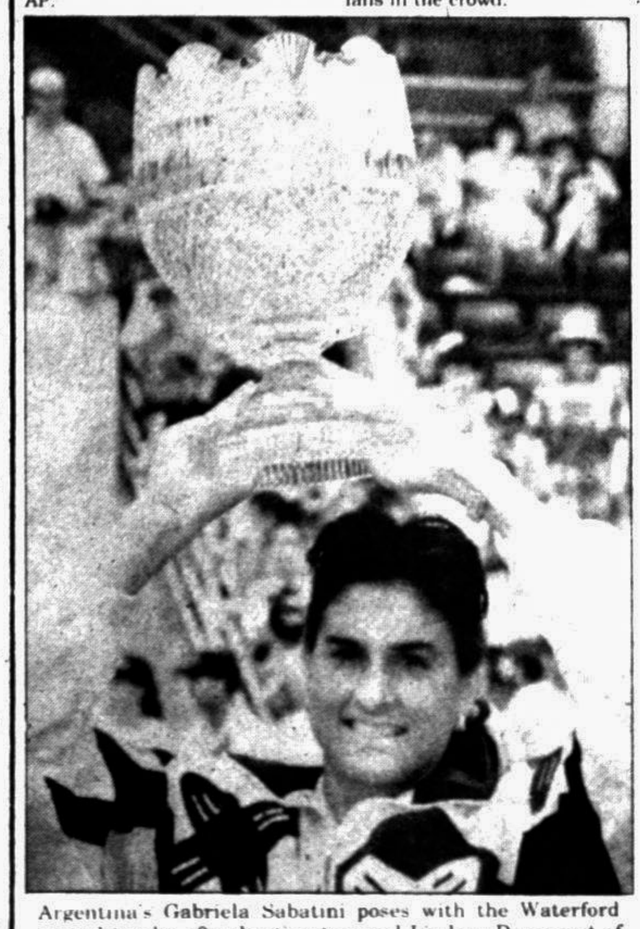
There were no knockdowns in the fight and neither fighter appeared to be hurt.

Duran, who has been fighting professionally since 1967, said, "I'm not going to retire. I'm going to stick around and fight some more.

"I couldn't move as quick as I wanted to," Duran said. "I think I was a little slow tonight. I'd like to fight Pazienza again."

Sabatini's double delight

SYDNEY, Jan 15: A resurgent Gabriela Sabatini downed Lindsay Davenport of the United States in the final of the US dlrs 650,000 New South Wales Open Sunday to win her second consecutive tournament title and confirm her return to top form, reports AP.



Argentina's Gabriela Sabatini poses with the Waterford crystal trophy after beating top-seed Lindsay Davenport of the United States in the final of the New South Wales Open in Sydney yesterday. Sabatini, 24, won in straight sets 6-3, 6-4. — AFP photo

Sabatini, 24, ranked No. 6 in the world, repeated her Virginia Slims Championship final victory over Davenport last November, with a 6-3, 6-4 win on the White City center court.

The victory gave Sabatini her second title success in the tournament. The other was in 1992.

It also is the first time Sabatini, who ended a two-and-a-half year slump with her Slims triumph in New York, has won two successive tournaments since April 1992, when she won at Hilton Head, SC, and Amelia Island, Fla.

"It feels great," said a delighted Sabatini, who was cheered on by a large contingent of flag-waving Argentine fans in the crowd.

"It's great to win a tournament after having not won tournaments for a couple of years. I really missed that.

"This week is very good for me. My game is there, it's coming back and I'm looking forward to keeping going. I never stopped believing. I never stopped working."

The Australian Open, the year's first Grand Slam tournament, starts in Melborne on Monday.

Sabatini, showing renewed aggression and with her serve working powerfully, took control of the match early and never eased up.

When Davenport, 18, the top seed and defending champion, double-faulted to hand the Argentine a 5-2 lead in the opening set the pattern was set.

Sabatini, the second seed, broke for the set after 39 minutes with an overhead backhand at the net and quickly raced to a 5-2 lead in the second.

Davenport, who said she was not hampered by a hamstring injury that's troubled her for a fortnight, broke back for 4-5.

But yet another unforced error, one of 28 she made to Sabatini's 16, gave the Argentine her third match point in the last game. Davenport, who had saved the first two with booming passes, then dumped another backhand into the net to seal her fate and ensure Sabatini her 27th career singles title and a check for US dlrs 59,500.

"She has so much variety... I was always kind of guessing what she was going to do," said Davenport, who earned US dlrs 26,500.

"She kind of had me on a string."

The American said the return to form for Sabatini, who had not won since May 1992 before her Virginia Slims success, meant she is a major threat at the Australian Open.

"I think she's pretty close behind Arantxa (Sanchez Vicario), especially with Steffi (Graf) out," said Davenport.

Sabatini, who admitted she had felt "lost" during her long slump in form, is brimming with confidence.

"This is the most confident I've felt before a Grand Slam in a while," said Sabatini, who credits her new coach of six months, Juan Nunez, with helping in the turnaround.

"I have a lot of confidence on my strokes. I feel more comfortable hitting the ball," she said.

"I think I played smart tennis (this week). I'm ready."

Sabatini, the fifth seed in Melbourne, is slated to face American Marianne Werdel-Witmeyer in the first round of the Australian Open.

Blackburn firmly on course

LONDON, Jan 15: Blackburn pulled six points clear at the top of the English Premier league on Saturday when they beat Nottingham Forest 3-0 thanks to second half goals from Paul Warhurst, Jason Wilcox and Chris Sutton, reports Reuter.

The victory stretched Blackburn's unbeaten run in the league to 12 matches and kept them on course for their first championship title since 1914.

Second placed Manchester United play Newcastle on Sunday and although a victory for the champions will narrow the gap to three points, United will have played one match more.

Ipswich, just one point and one place off the bottom, pulled off a major surprise at third-placed Liverpool where they won 1-0 with young midfielder Adam Tanner scoring after 30 minutes. It was Ipswich's first ever win at Anfield and Liverpool's first defeat in 12 cup and league matches.

Tottenham's revival under manager Gerry Francis continued when they came from behind to win 2-1 at West Ham in a tough London derby with German World Cup star Juergen Klinsmann scoring the winner 11 minutes from time.

Duncan Ferguson, Everton's four million pound (6.25 million dollars) signing from Glasgow Rangers, was sent off after a clash with Danish midfielder John Jensen in his side's 1-1 draw at Arsenal.

Crystal Palace, who last scored a league goal on November 5, but notched nine in two cup matches this week, ended their league drought with a 2-0 win over bottom-placed Leicester.

Efan Ekoku got Wimbledon's winner against his old team Norwich for the second time since his move to the Dons last October.

Aston Villa pulled out of the relegation zone with a 2-1 win over Queen's Park Rangers with John Fashanu (7th) and Ugo Ehiogu (76th) scoring the vital goals.

Chelsea drew 1-1 with Sheffield Wednesday after John Sheridan missed a first half penalty for Wednesday.

There were no goals in the matches between Leeds and Southampton and Manchester City and Coventry.

Any doubts about Blackburn's credentials to win the championship for the first time in 81 years disappeared after they shook off an indifferent first-half display to end Forest's own receding title hopes with three second half goals.

Terrific Tomba

KITZBUEHEL, Austria, Jan 15: Alberto Tomba streaked to his sixth consecutive slalom win of the season by almost a second Sunday and moved into third place in the all-time list of World Cup victories, reports AP.

Tomba had the best time on both runs to total 1 minute, 37.26 seconds. That was .82 second ahead of Slovenian Jure Kosir. Third was Ole Christian Furuseth of Norway, 1:38.20.

It was Tomba's 41st win of his career to put him behind only Ingemar Stenmark (86) and Marc Girardelli (43).

Tomba has not lost in six slaloms this season and carries a streak of eight straight from last year. He also has two giant slalom victories this season.

Tomba still leads in the overall standings with 850 points.

The results of the slalom will also be added with the second men's downhill from Saturday to determine a combined winner.

Luc Alphand of France, who took both races Saturday in an historic downhill double-header, did not enter the slalom to save himself for Monday's Super-G.

Indonesian Open title goes to Haarhuis

JAKARTA, Jan 15: Second seed Paul Haarhuis of the Netherlands defeated Radomir Vasek of the Czech Republic 7-5, 7-5 Sunday to win the singles title of the dlrs 328,000 Indonesian men's Open, reports AP.

Playing on an indoor hard court at Jakarta's Senayan Tennis Centre, Vasek, who is ranked 132nd in the world, took a 3-0 lead in the opening set by breaking the 2nd game.

The 59th ranked Haarhuis retaliated in the 5th but failed to win the 8th, bringing Vasek to a set-point 5-4.

However, Haarhuis, 26, fought back and survived from set-point by breaking Vasek in the 9th game, and then took over the lead with another break in the 11th game.

He prevailed by blanking Vasek in the 12nd game, shooting an ace to end the set in 49 minutes.

Haarhuis took the lead in the second set by breaking Vasek's service in the 5th game, and went to a match point 5-4. Vasek survived, breaking the decisive 10th game, but failed to win his own service in the following game.

As in the first set Haarhuis shot an ace and again blanked Vasek in the last game to win the second set in 50 minutes.

In the doubles final, top seed pair David Adams of Australia and Andrei Olhovskiy of Russia took the title by overcoming the Haitian-Japanese duo of Ronald Ageenor and Shuzo Matsuoka 7-5, 6-3.

Adams-Olhovskiy Broke their opponents in the 12th games of the first set and 8th games of the second set to win the match in one hour and 19 minutes.

Haarhuis took home dlrs 43,000 for his first singles title, while Vasek won dlrs 23,000. The doubles winners shared dlrs 21,000, while the runners up took dlrs 12,500.

The annual tournament which also offered a trophy from President Suharto, featured players from 12 countries.

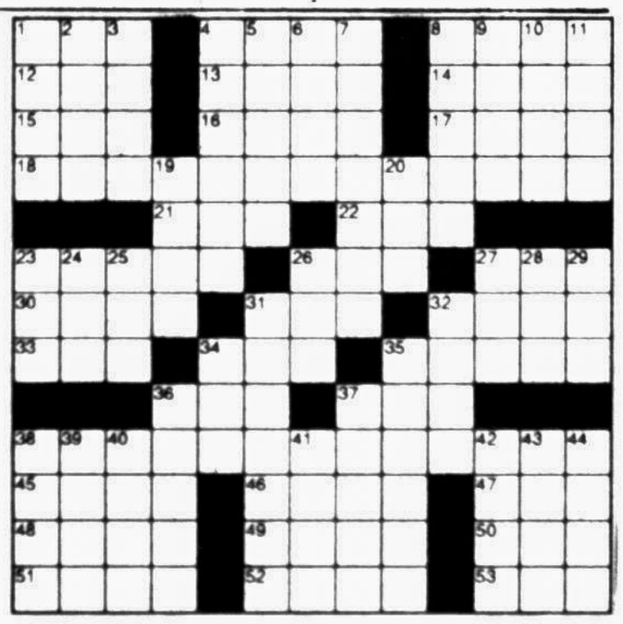
CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS
1 Nursery rhyme monarch, with 4 and 8 Across
4 See 1 Across
8 See 1 Across
12 "Kitchy-—!"
13 One side of the Urals
14 Director Kazan
15 Ms. Russell, to pals
16 Carry on
17 — -do-well
18 Aforesaid monarch's character
21 Motorists' org.
22 Wrath
23 Counterfeit coins
26 Whatever number
27 Master of the macabre
30 Request from the monarch
31 Fix
32 Request from the monarch
33 Verily
34 Oft-tattooed word
35 One of Franklin's certainties
36 Succor
37 River isle
38 Request from the monarch
45 Basis for an invention
46 Poet Ogden
47 Peculiar
48 Cavort
49 Genealogy chart
50 Humongous
51 Kind of machine or car
52 Solidifies
53 "What'd I tell you?"

DOWN
1 Gumbo base
2 Appear ominously
3 Catnap
4 Footballer-turned-actor
5 "— Little Prayer"
6 Barcelona boy
7 Machine gun name
8 Perfume
9 Bread spread
10 Stead
11 Count's counterpart
19 Storm
20 Desiccate
23 Bond, for one
24 Golfer's concern
25 "— Lazy River"
26 Intention
27 Curse
28 Have bills
29 Monorails, often
31 Chipmunks, squirrels, etc.
32 Dog owner's ordeal
34 Wire measure
35 Percentages paid to the church
36 Render suitable
37 Plus
38 Evergreens
39 Object of worship
40 Sample recording
41 Exceptional
42 Filches
43 Entertainer Adams
44 Advantage

Solution time: 23 mins.

M	A	W		M	O	P		C	H	E	A	P
A	D	A		A	M	A		H	O	R	D	E
D	A	G		M	E	S	S	E	N	G	E	R
A	G	O		A	L	T	A	R				
M	E	N	D		E	A	R		M	O	S	T
			E	F	T		A	Z	A	L	E	A
C	O	U	P	E				O	R	D	E	R
A	B	S	O	R	B		D	O	R			
D	I	E	T		E	L	I		Y	O	L	K
				G	R	A	N	D		S	O	O
P	A	S	S	E	N	G	E	R		A	N	A
O	S	I	E	R		O	R	E		G	E	L
D	A	N	C	E		S	O	W		E	R	A



CRYPTOQUIP

N G Q Z F K L Q L R H Z C C E F C F I H J I Q X E F J F I F I N B K C E H L R W B K X.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: SAID HUMORIST TO ADDLED ASSISTANT, "TIME TO KNOCK-KNOCK OFF FOR LUNCH."

Today's Cryptoquip clue: R equals P

The Cryptoquip 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.