

Graf to call it a day?

FRANKFURT, Germany, July 30: Her back hurting and her tax records under scrutiny, Steffi Graf is seriously thinking of ending her tennis career, according to a German news magazine, reports AP.

The top-ranked woman player in the world could announce her retirement in the next few weeks or after the US Open, the magazine quoted an unidentified friend of Graf as saying.

"It has never been that close," Spiegel quoted the friend as saying.

"She is really thinking very intensely about her retirement. She is really not enjoying anything anymore," the friend was quoted as saying, according to Spiegel, which released a summary of the article over the weekend, before its issue hits newsstands on Monday.

"She is asking herself why she should go on playing," the friend told Spiegel.

Her chronic back injury is giving Graf again a lot of pain, Spiegel said.

Graf's season has been reduced because of the back ailment. But when she has played, she has been invincible. Unbeaten this year, Graf has won the French Open and Wimbledon.

She has pulled out of the upcoming San Diego event because of the back injury.

Spiegel also published new allegations about Graf's taxes.

The magazine said Graf's



STEFFI GRAF

clan had made no tax declaration for four years, paying only seven million marks (dfls 5 million) taxes on an estimated income of 35 million marks (dfls 25 million). Taxes in Germany often go as high as 50 per cent of the income.

McRae leads

555 Subaru World Rally Team driver Colin McRae shot from fifth to first place in the Rally of New Zealand after the accident which side-lined Saturday night's leader Tommi Makinen, said a press release yesterday.

McRae, winner of this event for the past two years, now leads the rally by a full 12 seconds at the half-way stage — with his strongest stages still to come.

"Stage 10 was always going to be a test for us," explains Colin. "We knew that it Tommi was quicker than us on a twisting stage like that, he would be very difficult to catch."

In the event he need not have worried his perfor-



mance on the longest stage of the day left his rivals trailing in his wake — and sounded a warning that the Subarus are likely to dominate the demanding 45 km Motu Road stage today.

"Colin's speed on the twisting sections is incredible — he's uncatchable," said second placed Didier Auriol. "I think that tomorrow he will wave us goodbye in the morning."

McRae's teammate Richard Burns remained well within sight of the leaders — despite being hampered by a minor electrical problem. He finished the day less than a minute behind McRae in 7th place. With less than 30 seconds separating them from third placed Armin Schwarz, Richard and co-driver Robert Reid are confident they too can take full advantage of the Subaru Impreza 555's superb handling on the Motu Stage.

The third 555 Subaru World Rally Team driver Possum Bourne started the day fighting to stay in 10th place and unhappy with the way his car was handling. However, after switch his suspension set up midway through the day, his confidence improved enormously and he finished the day in ninth place with a 5 1/2 minute lead over his closest rival.



Monica Seles and Martina Navratilova poses before starting their exhibition match at the Atlantic City Convention Centre in New Jersey on July 29. The game which Seles won, marked her long-awaited return to competitive tennis after a break of two years. — AFP/UNB photo

Seles shows old hands

ATLANTIC CITY, New Jersey, July 30: Former world number one Monica Seles made her long-awaited return to competitive tennis with a 6-3, 6-2 straight sets victory over Martina Navratilova in an exhibition match on Saturday, report agencies.

Playing before a national television audience and a crowd of 7,500 at the Atlantic City Convention Center, the 21-year-old Yugoslav-born American brandishing a wicked serve and attacking shots she once only dreamed of taking.

It was the first public match for Seles since being stabbed in the back by an admitted fan of rival Steffi Graf at the Citizen Cup in Hamburg, Germany, on April 30, 1993.

"It was an unbelievable feeling, just great," said Seles of the moment she first walked back on to a tennis court. "I can't even put in words."

"The electricity of the crowd" is what I missed most," said Seles, who was given a lengthy standing ovation before the match by the sell-out crowd.

"I want to thank the fans for all their support through a difficult time. It's great to be back. Hopefully, in the next few years I'll be a lot better."

The WTA tour has agreed to co-rank her as number one with Steffi Graf of Germany for a limited period and Seles will play in the US Open next month.

The 38-year-old Navratilova, also a former world number one, has retired from singles play but still competes in doubles.

Nervous and tentative at the start, Seles opened with

a double-fault, the first of six by her in the match. But she won the next point stretching for a backhand and passing Navratilova down the line. It was vintage Seles, and there would be plenty more of those along with applause by an impressed Navratilova.

For the first few games, the match seemed subdued, as if it were anticlimactic to her actual return. Seles had received a two-minute standing ovation when she came on court, smiling, giggling, walking tall in a white dress, then burying her face in her hands almost in embarrassment. She slapped a high-five with Navratilova, exchanged kisses, and began her comeback in earnest a few minutes later.

Seles won the first game with a service winner as hard as any she hit in the past. And by the time her grunting grew louder midway through the first set, she seemed as good as ever.

The court was surrounded by security guards — 65 from the Convention Center, 30, Atlantic City police officers, 20 guards from the Caesars Palace casino-hotel, one of the sponsors of the event.

Seles sat on changeovers as she always did, back to the crowd, facing the court, the same way she sat when she was stabbed. But here, she was far from anyone's reach, and a bodyguard sat behind her.

In the second set, Seles double-faulted only twice, a small penalty for a much bigger serve than she had two years ago. She had two aces and several service winners, played aggressively, moved well in mincing steps and hit hard from both sides.

Those passing shots were not a mirage," Navratilova

said. "Monica's going to be a contender wherever she plays. The second point, she hit a laser shot down the line ... to me, she looks the same as she did two years ago. It's like she was in a time warp, or something."

Seles broke Navratilova to start the second set, broke her again with a crushing forehand return for a 5-2 lead, then hugged her at the end after putting away the match on serve.

Navratilova, nursing a groin strain, may not have played her best match, but she gave Seles a fair test, and the result showed that Seles is ready right now to challenge the best players in the game for the dominance she once had. She'll be ranked co-No. 1 when she starts tournament play, and she gave plenty of evidence that she could have regained that ranking quickly even without anyone's help.

Seles became the youngest number one ranked player in tennis history in 1991 at age 17. Since 1991, she had retained the number one ranking until the stabbing in Germany forced her to withdraw from the WTA tour.

Seles has indicated she hopes to play one and possibly two tune-up tournaments prior to the start of the US Open on August 28th.

Seles was often consumed by laughter during her post-match press conference, an indication she is happy and relaxed about her return to competitive tennis.

"I felt very comfortable," Seles said. "Everybody was so nice and they all said wonderful things. So I felt totally at ease. I think today I was playing the big points well and hopefully I'll be able to carry it on to the US Open."

Lewis may miss world meet

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colorado, July 30: Eight times Olympic champion Carl Lewis strained his left hamstring while competing in the US Olympic festival long jump on Saturday, jeopardising what he said would be his last World Championships, reports Reuter.

Lewis injured his leg on his third attempt at the festival, a multi-sport competition, and said he did not know if he would go to the championships, which begin Friday in Gothenburg, Sweden, with the long jump scheduled to start on August 11.

"I'm going home to Houston, and we'll see," the 34-year-old Lewis said. "If I don't feel 100 per cent, I won't be there."

Lewis said that as his left foot touched the runway on the 20th of his 21-stride approach he left a cramp in his left leg.

"I was so close to the pit that I couldn't stop," Lewis said. "I had to jump. And when I landed and the leg was cramping, that's what strained it."

Lewis still won the competition, leaping a wind-assisted 8.12 metres (26 feet, 7 3/4 inches) on his first attempt.

He later said the Gothenburg meeting would be his last World Championship.

"I won't go to Greece," he said of the site of the 1997 World Championships. "Greece is great, but I don't like Athens."

Darnyi plans a comeback

BUDAPEST, July 30: Olympic swimming champion Tamas Darnyi, who retired last year, is set to make his international comeback at next month's University Games in Fukuoka, Japan, reports Reuter.

Darnyi, double individual medley champion at two Olympics and two World Championships, was named in Hungary's University Games swimming team after the recent national championships.

Agassi, Sampras in Canadian Open final

MONTREAL, July 30: Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras, the world's top-ranked players, beat Swedish opponents Saturday to advance to the final of the Canadian Open, reports AP.

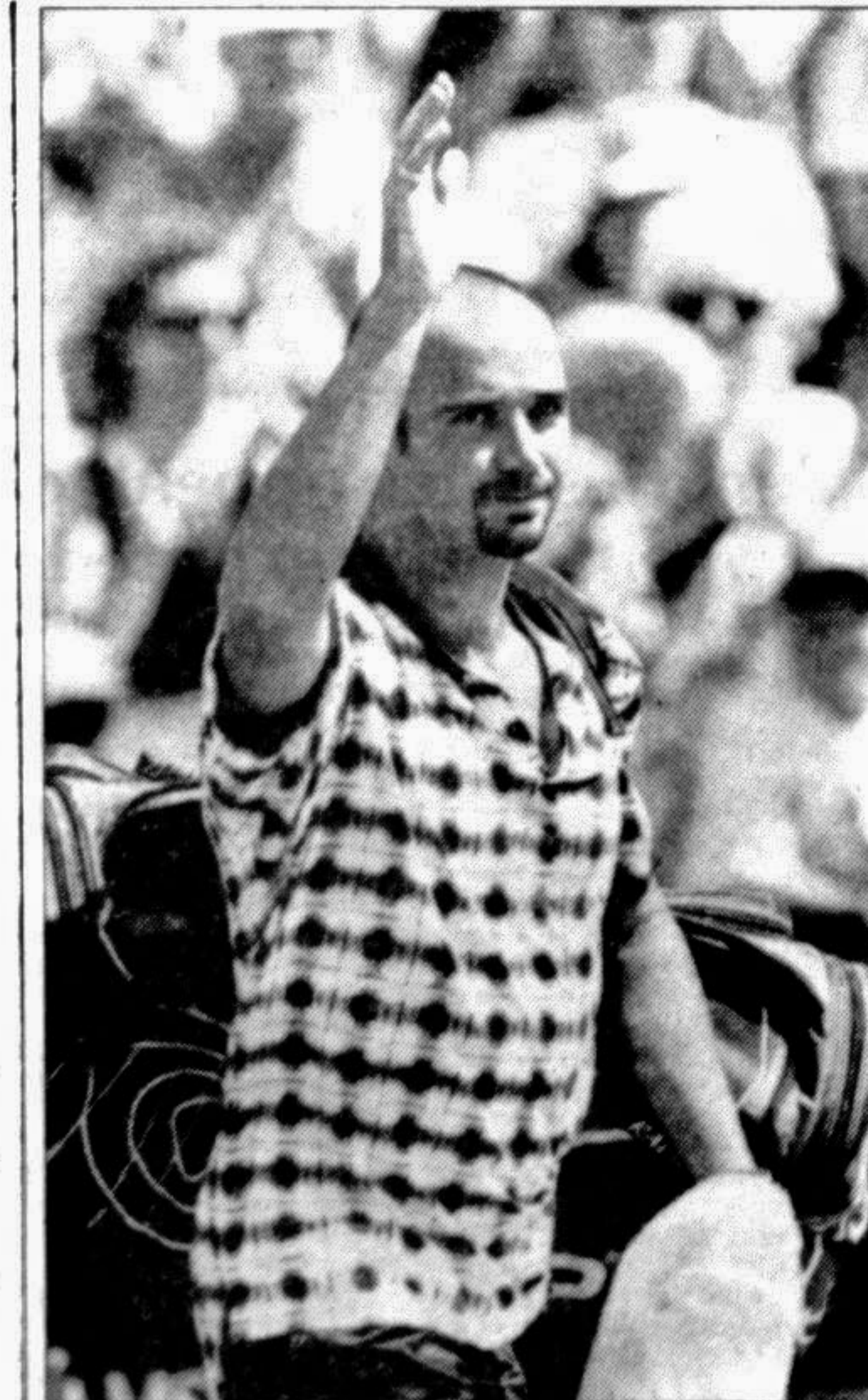
"I always want to play Pete," said the top-ranked Agassi, who routed Mats Wilander 6-2, 6-0 in a windy afternoon match.

Sampras, in his first tournament since capturing his third consecutive Wimbledon title, beat 12th-seeded Thomas Enqvist 3-6, 6-3, 7-6(7-3) in a night match.

Sampras fought off a match point at 5-6 in the third set, but then overpowered Enqvist in the tiebreaker.

Agassi, who replaced Sampras at No. 1 on April 10, is seeking his 400th career match victory. Sampras has won 395 matches.

Agassi used the wind to his advantage against Wilander.



World Number 1 Andre Agassi of the United States acknowledges the fans after brushing aside Swede Mats Wilander 6-2, 6-0 in the semifinal of the Canadian Open in Montreal on July 29. — AFP/UNB photo

Ottey dreams of a double

PARIS, July 30: Merlene Ottey, the world's favourite sprinter, will be rolling back the years at Gothenburg as she bids for a remarkable 100m-200m double at the grand old age of 35, reports AFP.

Ottey's grace and speed have been delighting crowds since the Jamaican won a bronze medal at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, going on the dual bronze medals at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, but she has only recently thrown off the tag of perpetual bridesmaid.

Between 1987 and 1991, Ottey racked up a 57-race unbeaten run in the 100m, only to be counted out of the semifinals at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul because of bronchial problems. A few days later, she came fourth in the 200m.

American Florence Griffith-Joyner completed a stunning double in those Games, and another double — this time from East German Katrin Krabbe — denied Ottey success in the 1991 World Championships.

Krabbe won both races ahead of Gwen Torrence, with Ottey taking the bronze.

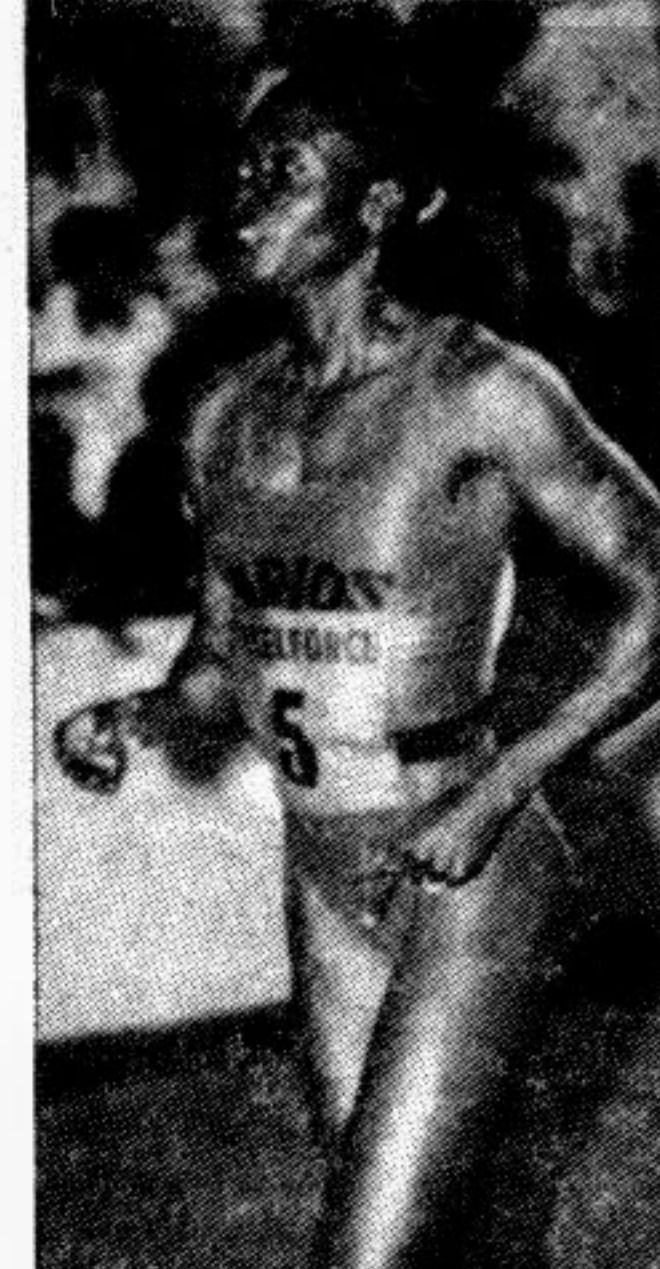
However, Krabbe's dope test failures in 1992, and her subsequent three-year ban, has given Ottey a different perspective on the latter defeat. Indeed, the Jamaican is convinced that, but for East European drugs programmes, her medal collection would be a good deal more impressive.

Ottey finally emerged as a title winner in her own right at Stuttgart two years ago, but not without some heartache along the way.

She was denied the 100m title by American Gail Devers after a protracted study of the photo-finish and a vain

appeal by the Jamaican camp, who claimed Ottey's chest was first across the line. In fact, Devers' shoulder was.

In the last five metres I



MERLENE OTTEY

caught her and I believe I won the race, even if she got the gold medal," she said.

Beaten by 1,000th of a second, Ottey responded three days later by winning the 200m hands down and receiving a memorable ovation from the crowd.

Now, after an impressive start to the season, she prepares for her fifth World Championship in the hope of achieving an elusive double of her own.

In a single five-day period earlier this month, Ottey ran four races at three Grand Prix meetings and won every one.

The roller-coaster started on Monday in Paris, where she equalled her own 100m world's best of the year with 11.00 sec — a mark which lasted only 48 hours as Ottey

clocked 10.92 to win in Lausanne.

The Swiss meet was particularly satisfying as she came from behind to beat her eternal American rival, Torrence, in the 200m.

The storyline was unchanged in London on the Friday, where she comfortably took the 200m event, beating luckless compatriot Julie Cuthbert for the fourth time in a week.

And although Torrence later took her revenge at the Bislett Games in Oslo and in Monaco, Ottey believes she is in shape to see of Torrence — just turned 30 — and the chasing posse of emerging youngsters.

"They think of me as the grandmother," she said.

"But that's alright. They young ones are still afraid of me."

Ottey's ability to stay at the top, when most athletes of her generation have long hung up their spikes, raises inevitable comparisons with Britain's Linford Christie.

Both born in Jamaica, both rated as the world's top sprinters and still going at 35, the pair were also late-comers to success — Christie establishing himself only at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992.

And Ottey acknowledges that Christie's staying power has also fuelled her own.

"I watched him break the world indoor 200m record at Levin this year and it gave me a real boost," she said.

"It made me think, he's the same age, running better than ever, so why not me?"

In the coming weeks, both athletes will be put to the test against the best the world has to offer.

But in the opinion of many, Ottey is the more likely to return home with a gold medal or two in her luggage.

A dating with destiny

PARIS, July 30: Linford Christie knows he must overcome the most heart-rending season of his career if the British Olympic champion is to retain his 100m world title at Gothenburg, reports AFP.

Personal tragedy, failure and frustration have combined to make the past two months the most demanding of his career as an athlete.

Yet those who remain loyal to Britain's greatest-ever sprinter — and they are many — still believe he can again overcome the American challenge in Sweden.

Christie's darkest hours came in a single week in June, he announced in an emotional television interview that he quit at the end of the season.

A hostile press, an unhelpful athletics federation and the constant pressure literally drove the 35-year-old to the brink of tears.

"I can't take any more. I just can't," he said. "Every day I get up and just want to walk away from the sport."

Thirty-six hours later, the torment turned to anger as he prepared to fly out of Germany.

As Christie headed for an airline desk, he turned to the press corps and said: "If you lot want some today, you'll have something else to write about, okay? I don't want to see any bloodshed on this airport but if you want some."

The following day, his mother died in a London hospital, Christie withdrew from the meeting at Nuremberg and returned home.

It looked very much like a season in ruins, particularly as his performances on the track had been patchy ever since he shocked everyone — including himself — by

breaking the world indoor 200m record in February.

Beaten in his first two Grand Prix races of the outdoor season — fifth in a 200m at St Denis and then second to Davidson Ezinwa in the 100m in Madrid — Christie looked like a man in trouble.

Yet the Jamaican-born Briton confounded his critics the following week.

On Tuesday, he led the 100m in Madrid from start to finish, despite a late surge by the fastest man in the world

Since then, Christie's form has wavered. He ran a 10.06 sec to win in Paris against a top-class field — comfortably beating Ezinwa, Namibia's 200m world champion Frankie Fredericks and Americans Jon Drummond and Carl Lewis.

However, he fared less well in Lausanne — finishing fourth in a race won by the man most tipped for the world title in Sweden, Mike Marsh.

Nevertheless, a win-assisted 10.03 for Christie was some consolation and he was not long in returning to his winnings ways, taking the Bissett Games dash in 10.12 sec two weeks later.

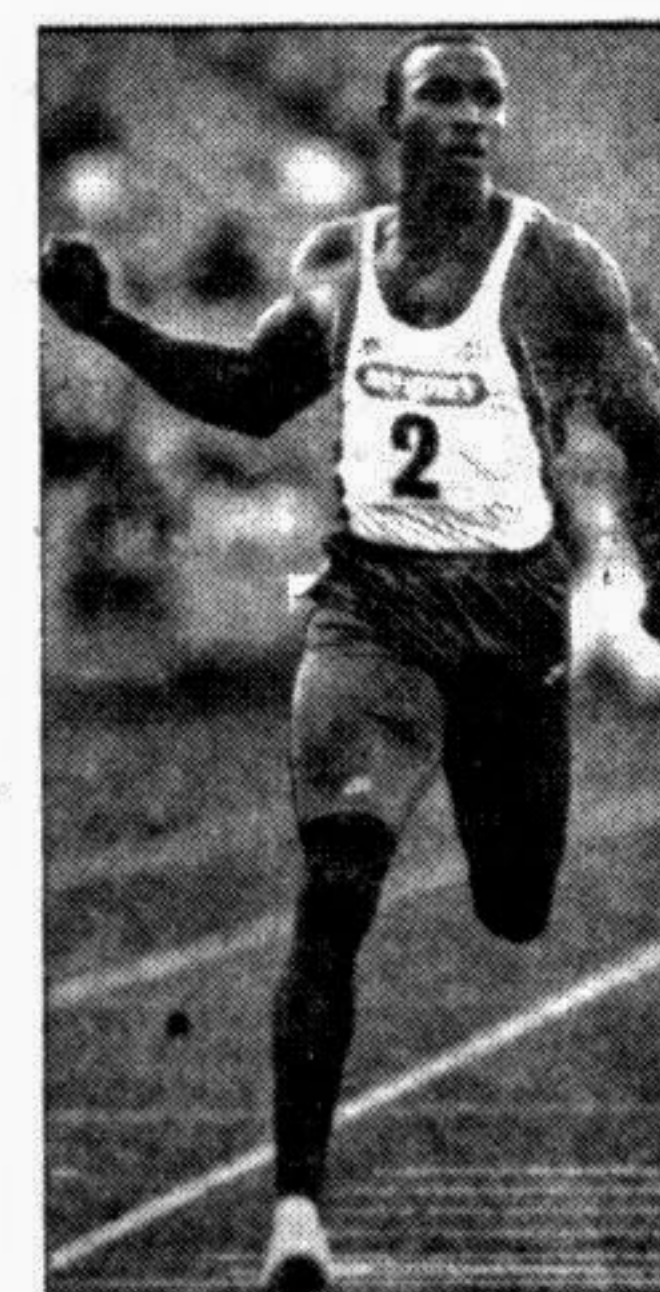
In short, Christie has shown that he is capable of anything this season — including not even turning up on the track, as he did in Barcelona when he snubbed the World Indoor Championships despite a personal plea from IAAF president Primo Nebiolo.

He may not be the favourite for Gothenberg's top event, but few will be surprised if his awesome mental strength, along with improving form, come together at the right time for a second world title.

In Stuttgart two years ago, pre-race American favourite Andre Cason twice dipped below the 10 sec barrier in the heats and ran a personal best 9.92 in the final — only to be blown away by Christie's winning 9.87.

Christie, who won all his major races last year — retaining his Commonwealth and European titles, used Stuttgart to deal the Americans a second body blow after he stunned them at the Barcelona Olympics.

In Gothenberg, Marsh could well suffer the same fate.



LINFORD CHRISTIE

Pedroso poised for more

SESTRIERE, Italy, July 30: Cuban Ivan Pedroso, who on Saturday set a world long jump record of 8.96 metres, is confident he can beat the nine-metre mark, reports Reuter.

In fact, he says he already had crossed the line earlier this year only to have the jump declared void.

"I jumped 9.03 metres at the Pan-American Games in March but was judged to have had my foot over the board," he said after Saturday's historic leap.

From the expression on his face it was clear he believed he was only a hair's breadth away from making an official jump.

"Nine metres is a reachable target," the softly spoken Pedroso said. "I feel sure I will (do it). I just can't say when or where."

After the stunning advances he has made this season it would take a brave person to bet against the 22-year-old as he bids for fresh glory.

The slightly built Pedroso makes up for his slender frame with a fine technique, hitting the board at great speed and then somehow pulling himself through the air towards the far end of the pit.

Born in Havana in December 1972, he started running in cross country events as a child before an injury when he was 12 threatened to terminate his blossoming career.

At that stage trainer Milan Matos stepped in, encouraging him to take up the long jump.

"He had a bad foot and the pain was unbearable over long distances. I began to concern myself with his affairs and now we're here," said Matos.

who travels with his young star on the European circuit.

Pedroso cleared seven metres when he was just 15 and went on to record 8.06 metres in 1990 at the age of 18. The same year he came in fourth in the World Junior Championships in Bulgaria.

He also finished fourth in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and the following year claimed a world indoor title.

However, the same year saw him miss the Stuttgart World Championships because of injury and 1994 saw a string of unexceptional jumps.

But things finally came right in the first half of 1995 as he lifted the Cuban and central American long jump record to 8.68 metres in June and twice beat Mike Powell, who until Saturday held the world record with his leap of 8.95 metres made at the Tokyo World Championships in August 1991.