

Zimbabwe's tour match poised evenly

WANGANUI, New Zealand, Jan 3: The New Zealand President's XI led Zimbabwe by 92 runs with five second innings wickets left today, setting up a tight finish to the opening tour match, reports Reuters.

The president's XI were 153 for five in their second innings, with wicketkeeper Robbie Hart and Andrew Penn having prevented the possibility of a second mid-innings rout.

After overhauling a 61-run first innings deficit, the President's XI were making good progress at tea when they were 99 for two.

However, they lost three wickets for six runs in eight overs after tea, invoking memories of their collapse to 111 all out in Tuesday's first innings.

The batsmen out included captain Lorne Howell, who made a determined 51 — the first half-century of the match — from 89 balls with seven boundaries.

Hart grafted for 110 minutes and Penn 96 minutes to end the day on 31 and 16 respectively.

The pick of the Zimbabwean attack was again left-arm medium pacer Bryan Strang, who followed his first innings six for 20 with three for 30 from 20 overs.

In a match where ball has dominated bat, the tourists were earlier dismissed for 172 in their first innings, with Henry Olongo top-scoring on 41.

India angry over Pak gesture

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: India has criticized Pakistan for denying visas to an Indian hockey team as further harming relations between the two hostile neighbours, reports AP.

"The decision to effectively prevent the visit of an under-18 Indian hockey team is a deliberate move to inhibit the normalization of relations," said a Foreign Ministry statement issued Tuesday.

Last month, India allowed more than 200 Pakistani athletes and officials to participate in the South Asian Federation Games in the southern Indian city of Madras, the statement said.

Political relations between the two countries have been frozen with no official dialogue since January 1994.

Nigeria urged to rethink

ADDIS ABABA, Jan 3: The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) said on Wednesday it hoped Nigeria would reconsider their decision to withdraw from the African Nations' Soccer Cup, which starts next week in South Africa, reports Reuters.

OAU spokesman Ibrahim Dagash said the OAU regretted very much Nigeria's decision to pull out.

"The OAU hopes Nigeria will reconsider its decision to withdraw if all the necessary arrangements are taken to ensure the security of its players," he said.

"We are aware of Nigeria's important role and contributions in the field of sports in Africa and hope that everything will be arranged to allow their participation," he added.

Nigerian Sports Minister Jim Nwobodo said on Saturday his country was pulling out because of fears for the safety of its players in South Africa, who had led a campaign against Nigeria over the hanging in November of nine minority rights activists, including writer Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Only for goal glut

BONN, Jan 3: FIFA is ready to experiment with larger goals in 1996 in a bid to make football more attractive, according to a top official, reports AFP.

FIFA secretary general Joseph Blatter, speaking in Wednesday's edition of the German magazine Stern, said the guardians of the game's rules — the international board — had backed the idea.

"The guardians of the holy Grail have agreed to widen the posts by the diameter of two balls, roughly 50 cm, and to raise the crossbar by the diameter of one ball," Blatter said.

"They will take the formal decision in March and we will arrange a trial after that."

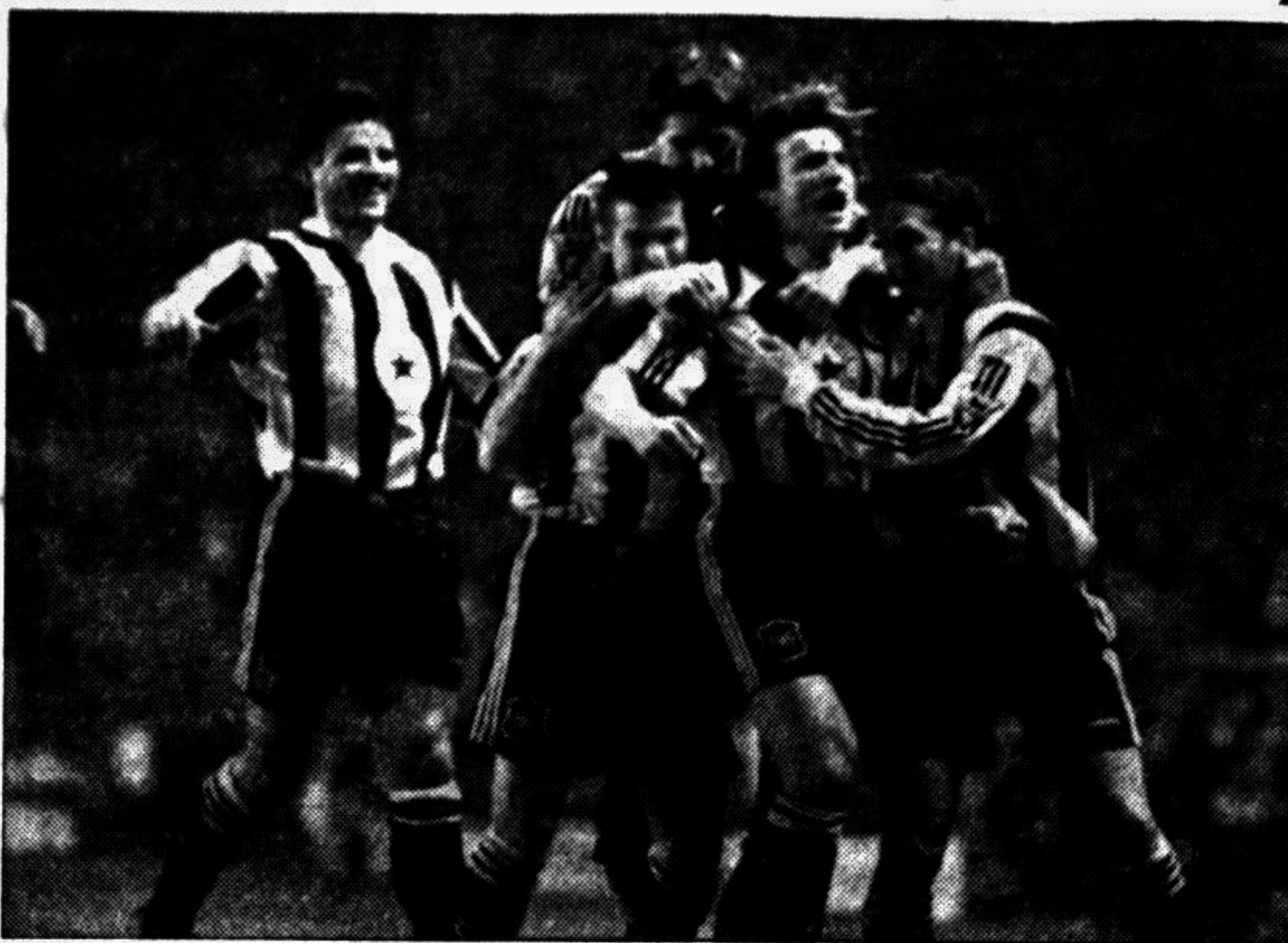
The size of the goals, currently 7.32m by 2.44m, have been unchanged since 1874 and will remain so at least until the 1998 World Cup finals in France.

Blatter said, "We will play the 1998 World Cup with the current rules. For 2002, we will have made other decisions about kick-ins (instead of throw-ins) and sudden death extra time (instead of penalty shoot-outs)."

However, the prospect of larger goals has not pleased the German Football Federation (DFB).

"We can't see any way of putting this into practice," said spokesman Wolfgang Nierbach.

"We've got 100,000 football pitches in Germany alone. A goal costs 1,000 marks (715 dollars). Who will pay?"



Newcastle's French international David Ginola (2nd from R) is the centre of rapturous celebrations after scoring a gem of a goal in the opening seconds of the English Premiership match against Arsenal at St James Park in Newcastle on Jan 2. Newcastle won 2-0. — AFP/UNB photo

Newcastle restore order



LONDON, Jan 3: Newcastle, whose title challenge wobbled last week, bounced back with a 2-0 home win over Arsenal to stretch their lead at the top of the English Premier league to seven points on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

French international David Ginola opened Newcastle's tally in the opening minute and England striker Les Ferdinand added the second two minutes into the second half.

Newcastle had seen their lead eroded from 10 points to four by Manchester United after suffering a 2-0 reverse at Old Trafford last Wednesday and missing Saturday's action when their match at West Ham fell victim to freezing weather.

But they reasserted their supremacy on Tuesday, 24 hours after United were thrashed 4-1 at Tottenham in their third successive away defeat and their heaviest beating in the league in four years.

Newcastle could not have wished for a better start. Paul Kitson, making his first start since April, chested the ball into Ginola's path 25 metres out and the Frenchman thumped in a right-foot shot.

England goalkeeper David Seaman dived and got a hand to the ball but could only turn it on to the inside of his left post and into the net.

Two minutes after the interval Ferdinand took a long

ball from Warren Barton and raced into the box before striking hard and low. Seaman against got a hand to the ball but could not prevent it rolling over the line for Ferdinand's 22nd goal of the season.

Newcastle lead the table with 48 points from 21 games. Manchester United have 41 from 22.

It was Newcastle's 11th win in 11 games at their St James' Park ground this season and made the north-eastern club even hotter odds-on favourites to win the title.

Newcastle's odds were reduced from 2-5 to 2-7, while third-placed Liverpool-10 points behind the leaders — were rated second-favourites at 9-2.

Paul Furlong scored a last-minute goal to give Chelsea a 2-1 victory at Queen's Park Rangers in a London derby, the only other Premier league game of the day.

QPR, one from bottom of the table, took the lead 20 minutes from the end when Bradley Allen headed in a cross from Trevor Sinclair.

Only a minute earlier Chelsea had lost former Dutch international Ruud Gullit, who had been injured and carried off on a stretcher.

But Chelsea rallied and seven minutes after QPR's goal they equalised when Matt Brazier-unluckily deflected the ball into his own net after meeting a shot from Michael Duberry with his

head. QPR's misery was completed in the final minute when Furlong headed in his first goal of the season from substitute Gavin Peacock's left-wing cross to the far post.

QPR are eight points above bottom-of-the-table Bolton, who on Tuesday sacked manager Roy McFarland, a former England defender.

Newcastle manager Kevin Keegan said: "We played tremendously well, but they were all so fired up for it. The players had been chopping at the bit waiting for the game and I knew they wanted to bury the ghost of Old Trafford."

"To be fair, 2-0 doesn't tell the true story and that's not being disrespectful to Arsenal."

"The lead is up to seven now and we've had that before, but when you play the way we did tonight you feel you can take anybody on."

"We have to put on a lot more performances like that before we can start talking about ourselves as worthy champions but it was a display of a team who want to win something and that was missing at Old Trafford."

"If we play like that for the rest of the season we will win something. It was the sort of performance that gives you real confidence, particularly when you consider it was against a team as strong as Arsenal."

Joao a sly old Brazilian



PARIS, Jan 3: By pledging the 2006 World Cup finals to Africa, FIFA chief Joao Havelange has launched a pre-emptive strike to win what promises to be a long and bitter battle for the presidency of world soccer's governing body, reports Reuters.

Havelange told the Brazilian newspaper Journal do Brasil in an interview that he would personally tell South African President Nelson Mandela that the World Cup would go to Africa.

"To reward the progress that has been made, I will tell President Nelson Mandela on January 10 that the 2006 World Cup will be on their continent. Africa has the right to hold its first World Cup," he was quoted as saying.

The move will be seen in international soccer circles as part of Havelange's power struggle with European Football Union (UEFA) boss Lennart Johansson, a declared candidate for the FIFA presidency at the next elections in 1998.

The decision to award the 2006 finals will not be taken for another four years and is a matter for the whole of FIFA, not just its president, but that counts for little in the grand scheme of world soccer politics.

Havelange said in 1994 that his sixth four-year term as FIFA president, ending in 1998, would be his last. But his stance has changed since then and he has openly suggested he may well stand again.

In tactical terms, with European countries expected to line up solidly behind Johansson, Havelange would need to be able to count on votes from the African continent — and what better way to win them than by pledging the world finals?

It's a gamble which could even win the day. Havelange has successfully countered challenges to his leadership before with astute plays to disarm his rivals.

He looked highly vulnerable just before the last election in 1994 when there was ill-disguised irritation among many FIFA members about his autocratic style.

When UEFA considered putting up a candidate against him, Havelange pulled off a master stroke, increasing the size of the World Cup finals from 24 to 32, a classic exercise in divide-and-rule strategy.

With the continental con-

federations all squabbling about who should get the extra eight berths, there was no chance of their uniting behind any rival to his presidency and so he was re-elected by acclamation.

This time, Havelange has clearly found the weak point in the campaign of Sweden's Johansson, a FIFA vice-president.

At the 1994 FIFA congress in Chicago, Africa pushed for World Cup finals to be rotated among each continent in a bid to break the traditional pattern under which Europe and America staged the event alternately.

The move was blocked by Europe and South America but was resurrected by UEFA in their Vision One reform package last year when they tried to attract worldwide support for plans to weaken Havelange's authority.

But Johansson has a problem because Germany is bidding for the 2006 finals and UEFA want the rotation to start then.

Havelange has turned the move against him by arguing the rotation principle should start after the 1998 finals already awarded to France, which would mean Europe not staging the World Cup again until 2018.

That's horrifying thought that UEFA could not contemplate — but it suits the rest of

the world with Asia getting the 2002 event, Africa staging it in 2006 and South America and then North America having the finals in 2010 and 2014 respectively.

Johansson has wisely kept a low profile since Havelange started showing his potentially vote-winning trump card but he can still hope the Brazilian's plan will misfire.

Havelange lost a lot of credibility late last year when he paid a visit to Nigeria and left the impression FIFA would award them the World youth championship in 1997 in place of Malaysia.

With Nigeria attracting worldwide political disapproval of its human rights record, FIFA decided in December to stick to Malaysia in what amounted to a snub of its own president.

Havelange's pledge to Mandela could also be seen as further evidence of FIFA's president taking a dictatorial stance though whether this would prompt a rush of votes for Johansson remains to be seen.

The amiable Swede shown little appetite so far for the political rough and tumble in which Havelange both revels and excels and many in FIFA circles believe the Brazilian can be ousted only by another challenger emerging from the third world.

DPRK accepts Atlanta's offer

GENEVA, Jan 3: North Korea has confirmed it will take part in the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, completing a full line-up of 197 countries, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

Communist North Korea was the last to accept the invitation sent to all 197 national Olympic committees recognised by the IOC for the Atlanta Games which begin on July 19.

Former US president Jimmy Carter, a part-time Atlanta resident, had contacted the North Koreans asking them to reconsider a previous decision not to respond, though it was not immediately clear whether his intervention had been decisive.

Durand Cup soccer

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: Tata Football Academy (TFA) sent Mohan Bagan crashing out of the Durand cup football tournament went it handed out a solitary goal defeat to the Calcutta glamour club in the first semifinal at the Ambekar Stadium here, reports PTI.

Mohan Bagan took TFA boys lightly after the latter was drubbed by East Bengal 3-1 yesterday in a quarterfinal league match.

Owairan's ordeal

RYADH, Jan 3: Said Owairan, who scored the goal of the tournament against Belgium in the 1994 World Cup finals in the United States, has been suspended for a year by his Saudi Arabian Club Al-Chabaab, reports AFP.

Chanda Rubin won the opening women's singles against Iva Majoli, but Ivanisevic then downed Richey Reneberg 7-6 (7-2), 6-3 and combined with Majoli to down Reneberg and Rubin 6-4, 6-2 in the decisive mixed doubles.

Croatia scored their second straight win in Group A of the eight-nation round-robin tournament. It has a 5-1 match record and is well placed to seal a spot in Saturday's final.

"I played very good tennis today," Ivanisevic said. "I served well and every part of my game was working well."

The United States, the No 5 seed, has a win and a loss and a 3-3 match record.

Rubin was extremely impressive in rallying from a 0-4 start to beat Majoli 7-5, 6-0 in the women's singles, winning the last 11 games.

Majoli is ranked ninth in the world to Rubin's 15th, but the 19-year-old from Lafayette, La, lifted the pressure on her opponent once she recovered from her sluggish start — and Majoli had no answer.

Rubin was aggressive from

SAID OWAIRAN

No details were reported but Owairan has been criticised in recent months for missing training.

Prince Faisal, president of the Saudi Football Federation, also barred Owairan from national team duties. Owairan was also ordered not to leave Saudi Arabia for a year.

Gullit battles to get fit

LONDON, Jan 3: Ruud Gullit resumed his battle for fitness on Wednesday to be fit for Chelsea's tie-of-the-round FA Cup clash with Premier-ship pace-setters Newcastle on Sunday, reports AFP.

Manager Glenn Hoddle is concerned that the 33-year-old flying Dutchman may have to miss the titanic third round battle — and his FA Cup debut — at Stamford Bridge after being carried off on a stretcher in Tuesday's dramatic 2-1 west London derby win over QPR at Loftus Road.

Gullit, who returned for Chelsea's gruelling four-match Christmas programme after missing six matches with a calf injury, now has back trouble and Hoddle revealed: "He has been having problems with the sciatic nerve for a little while now."

"He is in a fair bit of pain and we won't know how it is for a couple of days until it settles down. Sometimes these problems can go away in a few days but other times it can take a bit longer. The truth is we just don't know at the moment and we'll have to wait and see."



German Anke Huber returns a forehand against Dutch opponent Brenda Schultz-McCarthy during their Hopman Cup match in Perth on Jan 2. Huber won 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (8-6). — AFP/UNB photo

Croatia keep flag flying



PERTH, Jan 3: Goran Ivanisevic used his booming serve to guide top-seeded Croatia to a 2-1 victory over the United States on Wednesday at the Hopman Cup team tennis championship, reports AP.

Chanda Rubin won the opening women's singles against Iva Majoli, but Ivanisevic then downed Richey Reneberg 7-6 (7-2), 6-3 and combined with Majoli to down Reneberg and Rubin 6-4, 6-2 in the decisive mixed doubles.

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Rubin was aggressive from

the baseline and retrieved the ball doggedly when Majoli tried to move her around the court.

The American also served impressively, her seven aces contrasting with Majoli's nine double faults.

Majoli's ground strokes became increasingly ragged as the match progressed and she made 34 unforced errors to Rubin's 17.

"I started slowly, but I tried to keep the ball in play, made a few less errors and it worked," Rubin said. "My defensive play has improved a lot. I'm trying to run down a lot more balls and keep the ball in play."

Ivanisevic was suffering from sunburn after playing golf in the heat of the day on Tuesday, but his serve and volley game proved too much for doubles expert Reneberg.

The first set was tight, but Ivanisevic romped through the second set in just 30 minutes after establishing a 3-0 lead.

Ivanisevic, who won the Grand Slam Cup in Munich last month, said he is adopting a laid-back approach this week.

"I played unbelievably out there," he said. "I served a heap of aces. I'm timing the ball well and I'm having fun here. I'm feeling loose."

So loose that he served 19 aces to Reneberg's five in the singles and was then the dominant force in the mixed doubles, which the Croatian pair dominated after falling

behind 1-4 in the first set.

"I hit the ball OK in the singles," Reneberg said. "But Goran was pretty much unbeatable in the tie-breaker and then he got the early break in the second set — and that was all he needed."

The American pair had not met before they were paired for the tournament, and they lacked the understanding of Ivanisevic and Majoli in the mixed doubles.

"He's fun to play with," Majoli said of her partner. "I wish I could play mixed with Goran all the time."

France and South Africa, the other two teams in Group A, both have won two and lost four of their matches to date and are virtually out of contention for the final.

Croatia will meet South Africa in their last round-robin matches, while the United States will play France.

Defending champion Germany faces Australia in a Group B match later Wednesday. Switzerland and the Netherlands, the other two teams in that group, were inactive Wednesday.

The top team in each group after round-robin play will meet in the final on Saturday.

The Hopman Cup is the first in a series of warm-up events for the first grand slam tournament of the year, the Australian Open, which begins on Jan 15 in Melbourne.

Last Aussie hopes dashed



ADELAIDE, Jan 3: Russian top seed Yevgeny Kafelnikov snuffed out the last Australian challenge with a three-set victory over Mark Woodforde at the Australian Hardcourt tennis championship here late Wednesday, reports AFP.

Kafelnikov, the world No. 6, ended the title hopes of home-town favourite Woodforde, winning their round-robin encounter 6-4, 4-6, 6-1.

Earlier, Australia's other second round survivor, Scott Draper, bowed out 6-3, 6-2 to Britain's Greg Rusedski.

Kafelnikov, bidding to win the event for the second time in three years, downed Woodforde in a tough 1 hour-45 minute struggle.

"I felt I had to play at 100 per cent tonight," Kafelnikov said. "He is a tough competi-

tor, particularly in front of his home town crowd."

Kafelnikov's potent serve was the key to his victory, wearing down the left-handed Woodforde.

The 21-year-old Russian said he was capable of repeating his 1994 title success here when he beat Alexander Volkov in the first all-Russian final in the open era.

"I won this tournament two years ago, so why not? I'm top seed, I'm favourite, but it won't be easy," Kafelnikov said.

Kafelnikov will meet Rusedski in the quarterfinals where they will be joined by Italian Renzo Furlan, who defeated Slovakian Karol Kucera 6-3, 6-2.

"I'm happy with way I'm playing - my serving and ground strokes were good," said Rusedski.

Rusedski said he is trying to make better use of his powerful serve — one of the

strongest in the sport.

"I'm trying to play smarter, not go so much for the big serve every time," he said. "I'm trying to mix things up a little more."

Furlan said he was pleased with his form after a five-week break.

"I've had two tough matches here, but I'm concentrating well and I have quickly adapted to the surface," he said.

Argentina's Javier Frana progressed with a 6-4, 3-6, 6-1 win over German left-hander Carl-Uwe Steeb, while the remaining four second-round matches will be played on Thursday.

The 32-draw tournament, contested on synthetic Rebound Ace courts, is one of a series of tournaments leading up to the Australian Open, which begins Jan. 15 at the National Tennis Centre in Melbourne.

Bangkok ready to woo OCA

BANGKOK, Jan 3: Three-time Asian Games host Bangkok is confident it can convince the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) to keep the 1998 Asian Games in Thailand, a senior sports official said on Wednesday.

Santiparb Tejavaniya, as-

sistant secretary general of the Organising Committee for the Games, told Reuters Thai sports officials had already prepared a report for the OCA showing Bangkok is ready and able to run the event.

OCA officials said in December they were not satisfied with Thailand's preparations for the Games and gave Thailand a January 5 deadline to prove it would be organised and ready to run the Games, which are held every four years.

If Bangkok could not meet the deadline and prove its ability to the OCA, the committee said it would look for another host.

"We've fulfilled all the commitments requested by the OCA," said Santiparb in an interview. "Tomorrow we will send by courier all the documents concerned — we've met the deadline the OCA set."

The OCA, which represents 44 member nations, was frustrated with the lack of information given by the Thais on their level of planning and preparation for the Games.

Among other things, the OCA was upset that Thailand had still not appointed complete organising committee to oversee the Games, although it has had five years to prepare since being awarded the Games in 1990.

Santiparb, who is also OCA treasurer, admitted Thailand

had made little progress in preparing for the event.

"Nothing substantial had been done. The OCA had the right to be upset," he said. "But I think from now on everything will go on track."

"We will do our best, we have a lot of experience."

Some local sports commentators had questioned how Bangkok, which has hosted three Asian Games, could not prove it was capable and ready to run the upcoming ones.

Bangkok hosted the fifth Asian Games in 1966, then rescued the 1970 Games after Korea decided not to host them. The Thai capital also ran the event in 1978 after Pakistan pulled out just two years before the Games were to be held in Islamabad.

"Two of them we rescued, this one we really bid for," said Santiparb. "Hopefully the (December) Southeast Asian Games can also convince all people we can do it."

Santiparb said in the report sent to the OCA, Thailand gave names of the members and chairmen of each committee for the Games. It also included, at the OCA's request, members of the national Olympic committee on the various committees.

Thailand has also drawn up a detailed plan for construction of the facilities required for the Asian Games, which are all due to be finished six months before the event begins.



An injured Ruud Gullit of Chelsea is carried off the pitch on a stretcher during the English Premier league encounter against Queen's Park Rangers at Loftus Road in London on Jan 2. — AFP/UNB photo