

Singapore pours cold water on SL fans' claim

SINGAPORE, Apr 10: Singapore's cricket controlling body has dismissed claims by Sri Lanka fans of possible involvement of bookmakers in their country's defeat to Pakistan in the Singer Cup final here, reports AFP.

"We have absolutely no knowledge of any impropriety having taken place," Joe Srimberg, the president of the Singapore Cricket Association, was reported as saying by the Straits Times daily today.

"All who witnessed the tournament agreed that we saw cricket of highest calibre and competitiveness and we are deeply disappointed to hear of this report," Grimberg said in response to news from Colombo of the alleged rigging in the Singer Cup triangular meet.

India was the third team which participated in the 70,000 US-dollar tournament, the first major cricket competition that was hosted by Singapore as well as Southeast Asian.

A group calling themselves the Sri Lanka Cricket Lovers Association had asked Sports Minister S B Dissanayake to investigate Arjuna Ranatunga and his teammates' stunning defeat to Pakistan on Sunday.

"This is not cricket," Sri Lanka's Observer newspaper quoted a spokesman for the group as saying as he charged that bookmakers had used influence on cricketers. The paper did not name the cricketers allegedly involved.

Sri Lanka seemed set for victory but the middle-order batsmen, including skipper Ranatunga and Aravinda de Silva, collapsed for 172 in 32.5 overs while chasing a modest target of 215 set by Pakistan.

The reaction of the local press and fans to their team after their Singer Cup debacle contrasted sharply with the red carpet welcome afforded after the World Cup win last month.

There were no ceremonies and banners welcoming them back unlike after the World Cup win when the entire country erupted in noisy celebration.

Dortmund move atop

BONN, Apr 10: Injury-hit Borussia Dortmund took over at the top of the German First Division in Bayern Munich on Tuesday despite an unimpressive goalless draw at relegation-threatened Cologne, reports Reuter.

Title holders Dortmund, missing seven regular first-team players, drew level with record champions Bayern on points and went top thanks to their superior goal difference.

The Bavarians, who had played one more game than their Ruhr rivals before Tuesday, play hosts to St. Pauli on Wednesday.

The most controversial game of a busy night of action in the Bundesliga, however, took place at Schalke where Bayer Leverkusen managed a 1-1 draw despite playing most of the second half with eight men.

Leverkusen defender Markus Muench and German international striker Ulf Kirsten, who put the visitors ahead in the sixth minute, were both sent off in the 27th minute. Carsten Ramelow followed in the 63rd minute.

Despite playing with three men more than their opponents Schalke, who are in the running for a place in the UEFA Cup next season, only managed to draw level a minute from the end with a goal from substitute David Wagner.

Muench and Kirsten were sent off after committing their second bookable offences. Muench departed after a foul and Kirsten, who is considering a move to Scotland next season, went off for complaining at 35-year-old referee Uwe Kemmling.

Junior international Ramelow completed a rare trio of sending-offs in the second half on Schalke striker Martin Max.

"I have been a coach for 30 years and I thought I had seen everything but today was a new experience," Leverkusen coach Erich Ribbeck said.

Weah's woes

MILAN, Apr 10: Player-of-the-year George Weah said on Tuesday he feared for his friends and family in Liberia and called on the United States to intervene as factional fighting raged in his west African homeland, reports Reuter.

"I hope the United States can intervene as they have done elsewhere," said the AC Milan striker who is recovering from a broken arm.

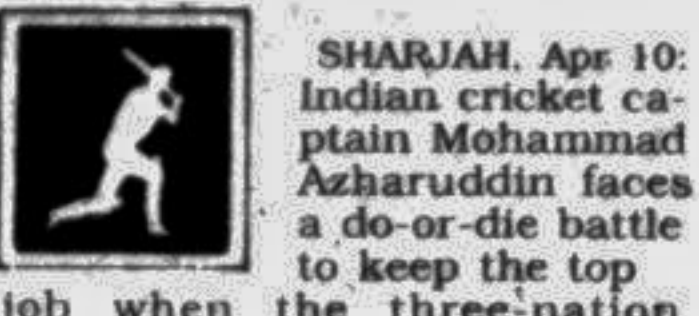
Weah, the 1995 European African and world-player-of-the-year, said he was worried by the news from his country and hoped to visit Liberia as soon as he could.

Probably the best-known Liberian in the world, Weah said he had written an appeal to his countrymen and hoped Liberian newspapers would print it.

"It's very hard for me to work and play with what is happening in my country but I must," he said.

"I must wait and have faith. For the moment I have no news. I don't know what is happening to my family and friends. I have not been able to speak with them. As soon as I can I would like to take them away from there," added Weah.

Acid test awaits Azhar



SHARJAH, Apr 10: Indian cricket captain Mohammad Azharuddin faces a do-or-die battle to keep the top job when the three-nation Pepsi Cup opens at this popular desert venue on Friday, reports AFP.

There is speculation that Azharuddin may be stripped of the captaincy for the upcoming tour of England if he fares badly in the limited-overs competition also featuring South Africa and arch-rivals Pakistan.

The 32-year-old Azharuddin, India's most successful captain ever, is the apparent scapegoat for his team's failure to make the World Cup final and last week's Singer Cup in Singapore.

In January the national selectors confirmed Azharuddin as captain till September. But a senior Indian cricket official said today there was a "distinct possibility" that their apparent Sachin Tendulkar may take over for next month's tour of England if Azharuddin failed to deliver during the Pepsi Cup.

"Yes, a change in captaincy cannot be ruled out," the official, who requested anonymity, said. "Azhar will have to perform both with the bat and as captain in Sharjah if he is to stay on."

Media reports in India said the selectors wanted Azhar out for the Singapore tournament itself, but they were overruled by the Board of Control for Cricket in India.

The Indian team for the 10-week England tour, which involves three Tests and as many one-day internationals, will be named soon after the Sharjah tourney ends.

The beleaguered Indian

captain, however, received unstinted backing from team manager Sundeep Patil, the former World Cup veteran, ahead of Friday's opener against old foes Pakistan.

"As far as I am concerned, there is no pressure on Azhar," Patil said. "He has been appointed captain till September. Moreover, he cannot possibly become a bad captain overnight."

"There was nothing wrong



MD AZHARUDDIN with Azhar's leadership during the World Cup or in Singapore where we beat world champions Sri Lanka. You can't blame the captain alone if the team fares poorly," Patil said.

But Azharuddin may not be able to silence his critics if India lose to rejuvenated Pakistan, buoyant after their resounding win in Singapore where they defeated Sri Lanka in the final.

"It's good to hit the winning groove again," said Amir Sohail, Pakistan's stand-in captain in the absence of the injured Wasim Akram.

"But we cannot afford to let our guards down. It is important to build on the victory in

Singapore," said Sohail, who came back strongly both with the bat and as captain after the embarrassing defeat against India in the World Cup quarterfinal at Bangalore.

Akram, who suffered a side strain during the World Cup, will not play here despite being one of the six players due to receive a benefit of 35,000 dollars each from the Cricketers Benefit Fund Series (CBFS), the tournament organisers.

The other five beneficiaries are former Test cricketers Hemu Adhikari, Chetan Chauhan and Yash Pal Sharma from India, and Naimul Ghani and Shaqat Rana from Pakistan.

South African skipper Hansie Cronje said his team was looking forward to making their first appearance at the Sharjah cricket stadium, which on Sunday becomes the first cricket venue in the world to hold 100 one-day internationals.

"We had heard a lot about Sharjah, but never got a chance to play here," Cronje said. "We are keen to make an impression in our first outing."

He said the team had learnt its lessons from the stunning World Cup quarterfinal defeat by the West Indies after the South Africans had won all their five preliminary league matches.

"We have done our home work for this tournament," Cronje said. "Both India and Pakistan are bound to be strong in familiar conditions, but we are well balanced. It will be a close contest."

Each team will play the other twice in the preliminary league with the top two advancing to the final on April 19.

Vialli Scotland bound?

GLASGOW, Apr 10: Scotland's biggest clubs Rangers and Celtic were both linked on Tuesday with Juventus skipper Gianluigi Vialli, who is set to leave the Italian champions in the summer, reports Reuter.

Vialli, 32 in July, is ready to depart after his contract expires and has expressed an interest in playing in Britain. London rivals Arsenal and Chelsea have also been linked with the striker, who began his professional career with Cremonese in the 1980-81 season.

Within 90 minutes of Rangers assistant manager Archie Knox all but declaring an interest in the player on Tuesday, Celtic manager Tommy Burns followed suit.

Knox said: "Every big club will be associated with someone like Vialli if he moves and we are no different. If he is available and we think he is good for us here, then we would be interested."

Burns confirmed that Celtic, like Rangers, had been contacted by the player's representatives and said: "I would think we would be actively involved in any chase for him."

"I think we are going to see an influx of quality players in the era after Bosman because there will be no fees involved," Scottish newspaper reports have suggested Rangers are considering a 1.5 million pounds sterling (2.29 million dollar) personal package in salary and bonuses to entice Vialli to Ibrox.

If he did move to Rangers, Vialli would link-up with former Serie A players Paul Gascoigne and Brian Laudrup.



Thomas Franck (C) of Borussia Dortmund goes down under pressure from Cologne's Holger Gaijamer (L) while Toni Polster looks on during a Bundesliga tie in Cologne on April 9. The match ended goalless. — AFP/UNB photo

Racism irritates Ince

MILAN, Apr 10: England midfielder Paul Ince believes top black footballers could desert Italy unless the federation here cracks the problem of racism, reports AFP.

Ince was the victim of racist chants at Cremonese on Saturday, and was booked for responding to the taunts by applauding minutes later, the ex-Manchester United star scored his first goal in the Serie A.

The 28-year-old told the Italian press it was time the federation took action, and took their lead from the English FA.

"I remember what happened in England seven years ago," he said.

"It got to the point when the FA realised the problem of racism was becoming really serious, given that there were so many coloured players in the championship."

The FA got tough, when a fan shouted a racist slogan, he was banned from the ground. And because of that, in my last five years in England when I was with Manchester United, I never had this problem."

"I can understand that for Italians it's difficult to imagine someone being kicked out of the ground. But in England there is really good security, inside the stadium, checking people as they arrive, as they leave and using video cameras."

And if the FA can tackle the issue of racism, Ince added: "The Italian football federation ought to do something about it in the interest of their own game."

The number of coloured players in Italian football is increasing all the time. Next season, there'll be more, though not probably at Inter.

"If things continue like this, if things get worse, the top black players, won't come to Italy. They'll go to countries where these things doesn't

happen. The Inter fans have been good to me, they've supported me even when things were difficult and made me feel one of them."

"But I'd be disappointed if they said to a black opponent, like (AC Milan's) Marcel Desailly or George Weah, what the Cremonese fans said to me. I couldn't tolerate them doing that to someone who's got the same colour of skin as me."

"But last Saturday, I was disappointed with the yellow card because I didn't understand why."

The Cremonese crowd were insulting me, and I applauded just to defuse the situation. I would have done any number of things, but I just applauded."

The goal I scored soon afterwards wasn't revenge, I'd already almost forgotten. I'd been trying so hard to score my first goal in the championship, it was a really wonderful feeling and took away some of the bitterness."

Ince, unlike many top Italians, has won himself a reputation as someone who does not go in for play-acting.

"I don't like making a scene on the pitch," he admitted. "I'm a real English footballer, not just officially, but also mentally."

"When I get knocked over, I get up again straight away, if I can. I don't want the fans to think I'm hurt."

"I'm here to play football, not to play on the ground." Ince's stay in Italy remains in the balance. His contract with Inter allows him to leave at the end of the season, if his family problems with adapting to life in Lombardy prove too difficult.

"I'm being sincere when I say that I love playing here," he emphasised. "I love the weather, my fans, my club, everything is okay."

Inter spokesman Gino Franchetti said that Ince will be meeting soon with club

president Massimo Moratti to discuss the players' future.

Ince may yet return to England. But most people at Inter, including coach Roy Hodgson believe that the combative midfielder, who has blossomed in recent months after a tricky start, will stay.

Meanwhile, Italy's football federation (FIGC) condemned the racist taunts faced by Ince, but insisted there was no underlying problem.

Ince was insulted by the Cremonese crowd after he collided with home goalkeeper Luigi Turci.

FIGC spokesman Antonello Valentini said: "It was the work of a small group of imbeciles. It was hateful and we strongly condemn them for it."

"But this phenomenon is really minimal. The vast majority of Italian football fans have nothing to do with these marginals."

"What I think is more important is the fact that three weeks ago, every player in the Serie A and Serie B demonstrated their desire to combat racism."

The players had lined up before the start of every match, with a shirt bearing a single letter, so that the two teams made up the message — "kick out racism."

The mayor of Cremona also apologised to Ince for racist abuse directed at him by fans of the local team.

Mayor Paolo Bodini said he had sent a letter to Ince and the chairman of his Inter club, Massimo Moratti, expressing his "sincere apologies for the despicable rudeness during Saturday's Cremonese-Inter match" and distancing the city from the incident.

"I hope you will not judge the city to be other than it really is on the basis of the rudeness and lack of sporting behaviour of those few citizens," he said.

Bodini said he was personally dismayed at the fans' behaviour in the city's Zini stadium.

Keegan being realistic

LONDON, Apr 10: Manager Kevin Keegan vowed defiance and refused to give up the ghost, but his words betrayed a fatalistic sense of impending doom, reports Reuter.

He had just seen his Newcastle side surrender two late goals to Graham Fenton to hand Blackburn a 2-1 victory on Monday night that all but ended his team's bid for the English Premier league title they seemed to have sewed up a few weeks ago.

"If it's not meant to be, it's not meant to be," said Keegan wistfully. "It's looked in the last few weeks that it isn't, but that's football, you have to take the disappointment."

Fenton, a late substitute who ironically comes from the Newcastle area of northeast England, broke Tyneside hearts with the double that may have clinched the title for Manchester United.

United beat Coventry 1-0 earlier in the day and lead Newcastle by six points having played one game more. United have four games remaining, Newcastle five.

When David Batty cracked in a superb left-foot shot against the club he left barely a month ago just 14 minutes from time, only his second goal in more than three years, Newcastle seemed to have cut the gap on Manchester United to three points.

But with four minutes left, Fenton, who had come off the bench for Mike Newell, thumped in the equaliser when Alan Shearer's shot deflected into his path.

Then, with the clock showing exactly 90 minutes, a Shearer-led attack again finished with the ball at Fenton's feet, the 21-year-old slotting home with real composure to hand Newcastle their fifth defeat in eight games.

"When David scored, after all that pressure had brought nothing, I thought to myself that it was a great story. But at the end of the day it wasn't the story," Keegan said.

"Once we got the goal, I

thought we might go on and win by two or three. For long periods we were just kicking in to their goal, yet history will show a 2-1 defeat."

"The dressing room was pretty quiet afterwards. We'll continue to fight though. We have to believe that United will slip up somewhere. You never know, there might be another twist to help us, stranger things have happened."

The title had looked all but certain when Newcastle were 12 points ahead in January, but

had plenty of highs and now we're suffering the lows.

"One thing's for certain. The players will learn more from what's happened this season than they could from reading all the books about football."

But Keegan made it clear the fowl will not be thrown in.

"If United lose at Southampton on Saturday and we beat Aston Villa on Sunday, it's back to the status quo."

"It's been a hell of a season and I know a lot of the country wanted us to win the title," he said.

"But we won't feel sorry for ourselves and won't give up until it is mathematically impossible. That's what professionalism is all about."

It's been an adventure which we thought would go on forever, but we're still in there with a chance.

Germany stay with tradition

FREANFURT, Germany, Apr 10: Presidents of the 36 professional German football clubs on Tuesday decided to ignore the Bosman ruling and keep the current transfer system in place till the end of next season, reports AFP.

Belgium's Jean-Marc Bosman won a ruling in the European court in December allowing players to become free agents to go abroad without a transfer fee at the end of their contracts.

The court also judged illegal the three-man limit on foreign players in the European competitions. European governing body UEFA officially accepted both rulings in March.

However, the lack of transfer fees would cause many clubs, particularly the smaller ones, financial problems resulting in the First and Second Division presidents voting in a compromise of 26 votes to 10.

Till the 1987/88 season, players will still have transfer fees at the end of contracts, but for about half the usual price.

Cruyff on slippery slope

MADRID, Apr 10: High-rolling Barcelona manager Johan Cruyff has shuffled his cards by leaving his

some big names in his attempt to find a winning hand for Wednesday's Spanish Cup final against Atletico Madrid, reports Reuter.

The stakes are high — not just Barcelona's season but also Cruyff's future at the club could hang on the result.

A win would set up Barcelona for a crucial ten-day period in which they face Bayern Munich in the UEFA Cup semifinal and meet Atletico once again in an eagerly-awaited match that looks likely to decide the Spanish championship.

A defeat could send Barcelona into a downward spiral and end Cruyff's eight years in charge at the Nou Camp stadium.

"The dream of the three titles is close," said the ever-optimistic Cruyff on Monday.

Cruyff — who very rarely repeats a line-up — is betting on a re-worked side that will

leave out some of the most-established names in the Barcelona squad.

Out are shaven-headed midfielder Ivan de la Pena, top-scorer Meho Kodro and fellow striker Angel Cuellar.

In their place are Cruyff's son Jordi and a host of younger players who have come up through Barcelona's junior teams.

Cruyff's gamble comes at the end of a difficult campaign which began when he was whistled by fans at the pre-season team presentation because of his decision to sell Hristo Stoichkov to Parma.

Barcelona have missed the strength up-front of the fiery Bulgarian international, and have failed to find the form that took them to two European Cup finals.

But Cruyff has ridden his luck and knows that the game isn't over until all the cards are played — his side came from behind to take three consecutive championships in the last game of the season.

In true Wild West fashion the Dutchman has more than a few tricks up his sleeve.

He regularly raises the stakes by ordering Barcelona's games to be played before those of his direct opponents in the league.

And with the cool hand of a master in psychological pressure Cruyff lets slip some well-timed remarks which many believe are designed to destabilise his rivals.

On Tuesday Atletico owner Jesus Gil blamed a "campaign" designed to disturb his players for a slump that has seen his side squander an 11-point lead in the Spanish league.

But Atletico no longer hold all the cards, and are now just three points ahead of Barcelona.

"I don't like Barcelona, they're lucky," said Gil.

Barcelona were indeed lucky in their league match in Atletico's Vicente Calderon Stadium earlier this season — they escaped with a 3-1 defeat from what should have been a six or seven-nil hiding.

But the tables have turned since then, and the smart money in Spain is now backing Cruyff to pull the first of what could be three aces out of the pack.

Legends to make a comeback in Euro '96

LONDON, Apr 10: Images of English soccer legends will adorn the streets of the eight venue cities from this week as the build-up to the European Championship finals in June intensifies, reports Reuter.

Posters of Sir Stanley Matthews, Sir Bobby Charlton, Bobby Moore, Gary Lineker, Dixie Dean and a player from an 1880s team will be displayed on banners and lamp posts in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Newcastle — the host cities.

Euro '96 sales and marketing manager Jonathan Hill said: "We believe that it will help create a carnival atmosphere in each host venue and help ensure that Euro '96 is a football party no-one will want to miss out on."

Many of the cities have already had banners prominently displayed for some months announcing they are hosting the games.

The tournament starts on June 8 at Wembley Stadium and finishes with the final here on June 30.

OCA satisfied

BANGKOK, Apr 10: The Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), who had threatened to take the 1998 Asian Games away from Thailand, are happy with preparations for the event, a Thai government spokesman said today, reports Reuter.

Thai Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa met OCA president Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sabah today. Al-Sabah is in Thailand to check on preparations for the four-yearly Games.

The OCA president said he and his accompanying staff have seen a lot of progress in Thailand's preparations for the Asian Games," the spokesman said.

Last December the OCA threatened to look for a new host because they were not satisfied with Thailand's preparations.

Maleeva muffs it again

AMELIA ISLAND, Florida, Apr 10: Top-seeded Conchita Martinez of Spain, the defending champion, breezed through her second-round match at the Bausch and Lomb Championships, but third-seeded Magdalena Maleeva of Bulgaria lost her first-round encounter, reports Reuter.

The second-ranked Martinez beat 107th-ranked Andrea Temesvari of Hungary 6-1, 6-3.

Austria's Barbara Schett, the 56th-ranked player, ousted the eighth-ranked Maleeva 6-1, 6-3 in other second-round play.

The top eight seeds all received first-round byes.

Fighting to remain in the main draw, seventh-seeded Mary Pierce pulled out a tight

6-3, 4-6, 6-3 second-round victory over fellow Frenchwoman, the 129th-ranked Sarah Pitkowski.

Fourth-seeded Chanda Rubin of the US, the recent Lipton Championships finalist, won a speedy 6-1, 6-4 second-round victory over 115th-ranked Catalina Cristea of Romania.

Schett surprised Maleeva with her on court abilities which resulted in the Bulgarian constantly being on the run. The pressure forced Maleeva into making too many errors, especially in the beginning.

"It was just a weird match," Maleeva said. "It just shows me that now that I'm in the top 10. Every players that's playing against me is going to play out since they minds. This is what happens. I'm just going to have to go beyond myself."

Schett raced to a 5-0 lead in the first set before Maleeva held serve in the sixth game. In all, Schett lost only four points on serve in the first set.

"I think it was hard for her since I'm like 50 or 60 in the world," Schett said. "When we began playing, it was easy for me since she made so many mistakes."

In the second set, service breaks in the third and ninth game gave Schett the win.

Martinez needed a quick 55-minutes to dispatch Temesvari.

Temesvari only held serve in the third game of the first set.

At one game apiece in the second set, Martinez won the next three games for a 4-1 lead.

"I think it was a good match. I felt comfortable on court and I'm ready for the next match," Martinez said. "I have to play my best to win it (Bausch and Lomb title) again."

Seeds stumble in Indian Open

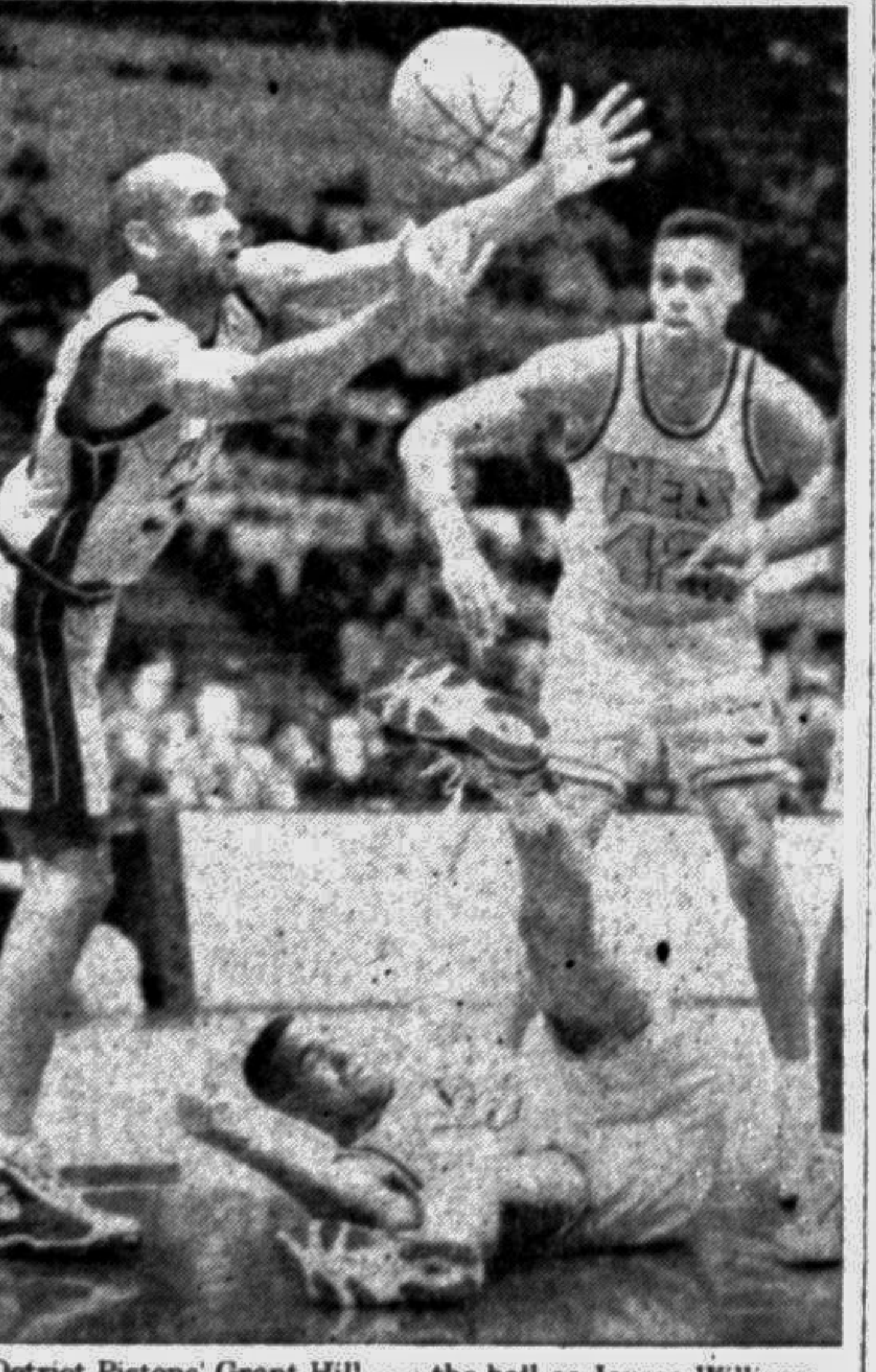
NEW DELHI, Apr 10: Fourth-seeded Jakob Hlasek of Switzerland and seventh-seeded Johan van Herck of Belgium crashed out of the 430,000-dollar Indian Open tennis tournament here today, reports AFP.

Sandon Stolle of Australia, ATP ranked 107th on the ATP computer, defeated the 42nd-ranked Hlasek 5-7, 6-3, 7-5, in a second round match on the hard courts of New Delhi's R K Khanna tennis court.

French veteran Jean-Philippe Fleurian, ranked 110th in the world, moved into the third round with a 6-1, 6-4 defeat of the 82nd-ranked Van Herck.

In another second round match, American Jonathan Stark, ranked 140th in the world, continued his run of good results defeating 100th-ranked Frederik Fetterlein of Denmark 6-3, 6-4.

Stark ousted the 119th-ranked Magnus Norman of Sweden in the first round on Tuesday. He will now play Stolle for a place in the semifinals of India's first ever ATP tennis tournament.



Detroit Pistons' Grant Hill — the ball as Jayson Williams of New Jersey Nets (on the ground) gets off balance during a NBA clash at the Continental Arena in East Rutherford, New Jersey on April 9. — AFP/UNB photo