

Atletico tighten grip

MADRID, Apr 21: Atletico Madrid took a giant step towards the first Spanish league title in 19 years when they won 3-1 away to second-placed Barcelona on Saturday, reports Reuter.

It left Atletico six points clear of Barcelona with just five games left to play.

Atletico's international playmaker Jose Luis Caminero rediscovered his form after several weeks in the doldrums and in the 15th minute beat defender Miquel Angel Nadal to set up Bulgarian striker Lyuboslav Penev for the visitors' first goal.

Barcelona equalised on the half-hour when Jordi Cruyff latched on to a cross from winger Luis Figo to back head the ball wide of Atletico keeper Juan Molina.

But in the second half Atletico came out strongly, going ahead in the 53rd minute when midfielder Juan Vizcaino blasted a magnificent half-volley past Barcelona keeper Carlos Busquets.

Caminero had the ball in the net soon afterwards but the goal was disallowed for a foul on defender Sergi Barjuan and the Atletico playmaker then hit the post with a superb 25-metre drive.

Barcelona went close to equalising but substitute Angel Cuellar shot wide after being put through by midfielder Ivan de La Pena.

As Barcelona pressed forward in the closing stages, Leonardo Biagini broke clear to notch the third for Atletico.

Bastia hold leaders

PARIS, Apr 21: Bastia threw the French championship wide open on Saturday when they held leaders Auxerre to a draw and left Paris St Germain a great chance to regain top spot, reports Reuter.

The 1-1 draw at Bastia left Auxerre on 65 points, just two clear of arch-rivals PSG, who host bottom club Martigues on Tuesday.

The Parisians, their morale boosted by qualification for the European Cup Winners' Cup final last Thursday, should be confident of regaining the lead with three games remaining.

Auxerre started well against Bastia, going ahead in the 22nd minute through a superb volley from Algerian international Moussa Said.

But Bastia fought back with spirit to create a succession of chances and Bruno Rodriguez equalised from one of them shortly before the break.

It was enough to halt a run of five consecutive wins by Auxerre.

"We relaxed a bit after we scored the opener and this is exactly what we should not have done," said Auxerre coach Guy Roux.

"Paris will probably take over on Tuesday but they started the season as favourites and we have other challenges, like the cup final," he added.

Auxerre meet Third Division Nies in the final on May 4.

Third placed Metz also stumbled in their title challenge as they were held to a 1-1 draw at lowly St Etienne and now trial Auxerre by three points.

Monaco continued their late challenge by beating Le Havre 2-1 to be four points behind in fourth place.

Iraq wants a foreign trainer

BAGHDAD, Apr 21: Iraq, disappointed at not qualifying for the recent Atlanta Olympics, is seeking an international coach to prepare for future international events, reports AFP.

The Iraq Football Federation (FIF) on Sunday announced its intention to hire a coach before the qualifying rounds for the December 3 to 20 Asian Cup finals.

Iraq are in Group 6 for August's qualifying group in Amman, comprising Iraq, Jordan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Amman is also the venue for their World Cup qualifying Group 9 including Kazakhstan and Jordan to be played in early 1997.

FIF's decision comes less than a month after Iraqi Olympic hopes failed. Iraq were beaten 1-0 in Malaysia by Saudi Arabia, who will go to Atlanta along with South Korea and Japan.

Coch Anouar Jassam and his assistant, brother Thair, were axed from their positions after the loss and are not allowed to coach anywhere in the country for five years.

The Iraqi press said Jassam adopted a "defensive attitude which had no effect."

Jassam however blamed the lack of competition against major international teams because of the embargo on the country since their invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.

The brothers, however, are likely to carry on their other job of coaching youngsters in Qatar, which they did as an extra to their Iraq duties.

The players may come out worse as a ban from leaving Iraq's borders hangs over their head, though four have already signed contracts in Malaysia and Qatar.

Eric, the adored 'bad boy'



LONDON, Apr 21: Manchester United's mercurial French striker Eric Cantona completed a remarkable transformation from soccer bad boy to hero when he was voted England's Footballer-of-the-Year on Saturday, reports Reuter.

Cantona, who received 36 per cent of the votes from the Football Writers Association, beat Chelsea's Dutch import Ruud Geull into second place with new England cap, Liverpool striker Robbie Fowler, third.

The Frenchman's season began late after he completed an eight-month ban for his infamous kung-fu kick at a Crystal Palace supporter in January 1995.

But he has made up for lost time in spectacular style, providing the inspiration for Manchester United's bid to clinch their second cup and league double in three seasons.

Cantona had missed only one of the 36 league and cup games that United have played since his return and has netted 17 goals. Significantly, he has scored seven goals in the past eight games, of which four have been match-winners.

United manager Alex Ferguson said: "This award proves the value of British justice. It is well deserved because there is no doubt that Eric Cantona has been the best player in the country this season."

Cantona, in France for a weekend break, said: "I am very proud and privileged. It is very special."

ROK spikers Atlanta-bound

TOKYO, Apr 21: South Korea beat Japan in four sets on their opponents' home ground in the man's volleyball Asian qualifying round on Sunday to secure a berth in the Atlanta Olympic Games, reports AFP.

The Korean spikers, whose hopes revived after Japan crashed to China on Friday, showed fine service receiving to score a 15-10, 17-16 '5, 15-13 victory.

It was sweet revenge for the Koreans after they suffered a humiliating straight-sets defeat to the Japanese in Seoul a week ago, which seemingly dashed their hopes for Atlanta.

South Korea ended the four-team round robin with five wins against one defeat, ahead of Japan on 4-2, China on 3-3 and winless Australia.

Earlier in the day at the National Yoyogi Gymnasium, China downed Australia 15-7, 11-15, 15-2, 15-7.

Japan will have to play the final qualifying round to be held in Greece May 3-5 for their last chance to go to Atlanta.

Spain's 1992 Olympic gold medalist, took third on high bar, behind Spaniard Jesus Carballo and Bulgarian Krasimir Dounev.

Scherbo said that although he was happy with his deal, he agreed the scores of many gymnasts didn't reflect the quality of their routines.

"I didn't expect to do so well on high bar, but the judges were a little bit strange today," he said. "Nobody could understand what they wanted."

Carballo became Spain's first world champion.

"I think it's a very good result," said the 20-year-old. "I don't know how to explain it in words. This is a big step for Spain."

In men's vault, Russian Alexei Nemov retained his title by scoring 9.756. South Korean Hong Chul Yoo and Italian Andrea Masucci shared the silver with 9.743.

On parallel bars, Rustam Shapurov of Ukraine claimed his first world title with a score of 9.75. He was followed by Scherbo and Nemov, who tied with 9.737. Nemov finished third in the pommel horse event Friday, the day Scherbo won the floor exercise title.

Yelena Nikolayeva set a world best of 41 minutes 04 seconds for the women's 10-km track walk on Saturday, reports Reuter.

Nikolayeva, competing at the Russian walk championships at the Black Sea resort of Adler, broke the previous best of 41:29 clocked by Lizevan Larisa Ramazanova in Ruzsvak on June 8 last year.

Clay-Bey, a corrections officer, lost to Joseph Mesi, 18, with a 26-11 decision.

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ERIC CANTONA

a tremendous honour for me and my country and a great tribute to the players at Manchester United."

He is the first Manchester United player to win the coveted award since George Best in 1969.

It is not the kind of award that ever looked likely to come Cantona's way after a volatile career which has seen him fined and suspended by several of the clubs he has played for and also banned from the French team for a year after swearing at the coach.

At one French disciplinary hearing, after being banned for three matches for throwing the ball at a referee, he walked up to each committee member and said: "Idiot."

His ban was increased to two months and he responded by announcing his retirement from soccer. But the following year he moved to England where he helped Leeds United with the league championship before moving on to Manchester United.

His attack on the fan last season not only earned the lengthy suspension but initially a two-year prison sentence. But that was commuted on appeal to 120 hours of community service.

ROLL OF HONOUR

LONDON, Apr 21 (AFP): Past winners of England's Footballer-of-the-Year award.

1948: Stanley Matthews (Blackpool)
1949: Johnny Carey (Manchester Utd)
1950: Joe Mercer (Arsenal)
1951: Harry Johnson (Blackpool)
1952: Billy Wright (Wolverhampton)
1953: Nat Lofthouse (Bolton)

1954: Tom Finney (Preston)
1955: Don Revie (Man City)
1956: Bert Trautmann (Man City)
1957: Tom Finney (Preston)

1958: Danny Blanchflower (Tottenham)
1959: Syd Owen (Luton)
1960: Bill Slater (Wolverhampton)
1961: Danny Blanchflower (Tottenham)
1962: Jimmy Adamson (Burnley)
1963: Stanley Matthews (Stoke)
1964: Bobby Moore (West Ham)
1965: Bobby Collins (Leeds)
1966: Bobby Charlton (Man Utd)

1967: Jack Charlton (Leeds)
1968: George Best (Man Utd)
1969: Dave Mackay (Derby) and Tony Book (Man City)
1970: Billy Bremner (Leeds)
1971: Frank McLintock (Arsenal)
1972: Gordon Banks (Stoke)

1973: Pat Jennings (Tottenham)
1974: Ian Callaghan (Liverpool)
1975: Alan Mullery (Fulham)
1976: Kevin Keegan (Liverpool)
1977: Emlyn Hughes (Liverpool)
1978: Kenny Burns (Nottm Forest)
1979: Kenny Dalglish (Liverpool)
1980: Terry McDermott (Liverpool)

1981: Frans Thijssen (Ipswich)
1982: Steve Perryman (Tottenham)
1983: Kenny Dalglish (Liverpool)
1984: Ian Rush (Liverpool)
1985: Neville Southall (Everton)
1986: Gary Lineker (Everton)
1987: Clive Allen (Tottenham)
1988: John Barnes (Liverpool)
1989: Steve Nicol (Liverpool)
1990: John Barnes (Liverpool)
1991: Gordon Strachan (Leeds)
1992: Gary Lineker (Tottenham)
1993: Chris Waddle (Sheff Wed)
1994: Alan Shearer (Blackburn)
1995: Jurgen Klinsmann (Tottenham)
1996: Eric Cantona (Man Utd)

Woodies win another one

TOKYO, Apr 21: Australia's world number one doubles pair of Todd Woodbridge and Mark Woodforde underlined their status by winning the men's doubles title at the Japan Open Sunday, reports AFP.

The three consecutive-time Wimbledon doubles champions overwhelmed the second-seeded Mark Knowles of Bahamas and Ric Reach of the United States 6-2, 6-2, continuing to assert themselves as the doubles team to beat in 1996.

The Australians, winning the Japan Open for the first time as a team, collected the winners' cheque of 63,000 dollars.

It was the fifth doubles title for Woodforde and Woodbridge out of eight tournaments they played this year. Their victories also included the first two Super Nine tournaments at Indian Wells and Key Biscayne.

With their 34th doubles title as a team, they moved up to fifth place on the all-time winning teams list, being tied with the American duo of Bob Lutz and Stan Smith.

Hoyer-Larsen leads Danes' blitzkrieg

HERNING, Denmark, Apr 21: Poul-erik hoyer-Larsen claimed a record-equaling third successive men's singles title as Denmark enjoyed a clean sweep at the European Championships on Saturday, reports Reuter.

Hoyer-Larsen, the world number two who had begun the tournament with shock defeats by Jens Olsson and Jeroen van Dijk in the team event, needed just 32 minutes to overcome his compatriot and training partner, Peter Rasmussen, 15-5, 15-11.

Rasmussen, seeded two, staged a fightback in the second game to lead 11-10. But a string of unforced errors eventually allowed Hoyer-Larsen to equal the three in a row record achieved by another Dane, Flemming Delfs in 1980.

"I am very relieved and happy to have won the title again and delighted to equal the record," said the All-England champion.

"I was not fully prepared for this week and that showed during the team event. But now I can begin to focus on my main target of a medal at this year's Olympic Games."

"I knew I had to keep pressing Peter to the back. He is a very good player but he still needs to learn not to be aggressive all the time. He has to work on his defence."

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Yelena's record

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Pete, Date triumph in Tokyo



TOKYO, Apr 21: World No 1 Pete Sampras, wielding an aggressive forehand, beat fellow American Richey Reneberg 6-4.

Sampras broke again at 5-6 with a forehand passing shot down the line and then served out the match.

Sampras, maneuvering around to hit forehands from all parts of the court, put



World No 1 Pete Sampras of the USA proudly holds aloft the Japan Open trophy after dismissing compatriot Richey Reneberg 6-4, 7-5 in the final at Tokyo yesterday.

7-5 in the Japan Open final Sunday, winning his second tournament in two weeks, reports AP.

Sampras regained the top ranking from Austrian Thomas Muster by winning in Hong Kong last week and protected it with his latest triumph, his fourth in eight tournaments so far this year.

He has a 1996 record of 29-3 in singles matches.

Against Reneberg, who ousted No 2 seed Michael Chang in the semifinals, Sampras kept up his strong serving, allowing only one break point, which Reneberg converted in the second set's sixth game by pounding a shot into the corner and charging the net, forcing a miss.

But that merely evened the second-set breaks, and



KIMIKO DATE

Reneberg under pressure from the start.

Reneberg, ranked 63rd in the world, had to save three break-points to win the first game. In all, he saved seven of 10.

Sampras, meanwhile, started out with service winners of 204 and 194 kph (128 and 121 mph).

Sampras got his first-set break in the seventh game with a backhand cross-court passing shot and a double-fault by Reneberg.

He broke again in the second set's first game with an overhead and then a passing shot wide by Reneberg.

"I really served well," said Sampras, who collected 154,000 dollars in victory. "It was windy and hard to get a rhythm, but I think I handled it pretty well."

"I wanted to hit some serves that were significant and scare him a little bit," he added. He won 74 per cent of his service points.

In the women's singles final, top seed Kimiko Date forced errors with her sharp-chocking and speedy retrieving and beat American Amy Frazier 7-5, 6-4 for her fourth Japan Open women's title in five years.

It was the third consecutive Japan Open final in which Date and Frazier had met. Frazier won last year after the Japanese player had beaten her in 1994 for her third straight title.

Date chased down some of the heavy-hitting Frazier's best shots, keeping her under pressure. After two exchanges of service breaks in the first set, Date broke again at 5-6 with a series of forcing shots.

After two more breaks each in the second set, Date survived one break point when a Frazier forehand down the line went long, and she held serve for 5-4.

The Japanese player reached match point when Frazier hit a forehand cross-court wide and won the one-hour, 18-minute match when Frazier hit a backhand long.

Trying to overcome Date's speed, Frazier had 56 unforced errors to 37 by Date.

Date, ranked ninth in the world, collected 29,000 dollars for her victory. Frazier, seeded third here and ranked 26th on the women's tour, received 14,500 dollars.

Americans aiming higher

AUGUSTA, Georgia, Apr 21: The US boxing federation has produced a 12-man Olympic team that is aiming to win at least seven medals in Atlanta, improving on a disappointing American showing four years ago, reports Reuter.

Ten of the 12 champions from Olympic trials earlier this month, including light heavyweight world champion Antonio Tarver, won their first-round matches here this week and thus qualified for the Olympic team without having to go to a second round in the box-offs which concluded on Saturday.

However, Olympic trials champion Lawrence Clay-Bey, at 30 the oldest member of the team, won a spot after working his way back from a first-round loss in the super heavyweight division.

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Experience rules the day

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico, Apr 21: Youngsters took a back seat to veterans in Saturday's finals at the 1996 individual event World Championships, reports Reuter.

In the women's floor exercise finals, the highlight of these World Championships, youth may have actually hurt two finalists.

Spaniard Gemma Paz, 14, and 15-year-old Vasiliki Savadaridou of Greece both tumbled well and had the audience eating out of their hands, only to receive disappointing identical scores of 9.775 and finish tied for fifth, perhaps due to their lack of reputation among the judges.

The event was won by defending champion Gina Gogean of Romania and Yuanyuan Kui of China, who tied at 9.85.

Kui said the gold medal on floor helped to make up for the snub of teammate Xuan Liu on uneven bars Friday. Liu failed to earn a medal after performing what was widely considered the best bar routine of the night.

Her low score may have been a result of the one-arm giant swing she performs. Judges have been trying to discourage the move for women because of the risk of injury.

"We were very disappointed, because we thought Liu deserved a higher score," Kui said. "I'm happy I could win a gold for my country."

Third place on floor was a tie between 1992 Olympic floor exercise champion Lavinia Milosovic of Romania and Ukrainian Lioubov Shcheremeta with 9.80.

Fifteen-year-old Alexandra Marinescu of Romania, a 1996 Olympic hopeful, had to settle for a silver medal on balance beam with 9.812, behind 1994 Goodwill Games winner Dina Kochetkova, who won with a 9.887.

In third were 1992 US Olympian Dominique Dawes and Xuan Liu of China at 9.80.

Dawes, the 1993 world Silver medalist on beam, appears to have recovered from the injuries that have plagued her the past year, and may be in the best shape of her life.

"I've had my ups and downs, and I'm just happy I can go into the Olympics this way," said the 19-year-old. "It was a good way to end the week."

The men's competition also featured some familiar faces.

Vitaly Scherbo, a six-time

1992 Olympic gold medalist, took third on high bar, behind Spaniard Jesus Carballo and Bulgarian Krasimir Dounev.

Scherbo said that although he was happy with his deal, he agreed the scores of many gymnasts didn't reflect the quality of their routines.

"I didn't expect to do so well on high bar, but the judges were a little bit strange today," he said. "Nobody could understand what they wanted."

Carballo became Spain's first world champion.

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