

Henman prevails in 'Battle of Brits'

INDIAN WELLS, California, Mar 12: In an all-British showdown between two of the Tour's most formidable serve-and-volleyers, Tim Henman beat Greg Rusedski 6-4, 2-6, 6-4 Thursday to reach the quarter-finals of the 2.2 million dollars 19th champions Cup, reports Reuters.

What was expected to be a war of huge serves and precise volleys turned into a return-of-serve festival, with eight breaks of serve in the one hour, 51-minute match.

"The last two times I lost to Greg, I felt flat. My approach coming into the match was to be really determined win or lose to get fired up. That was the case from the word go," said Henman, who was 1-2 against Rusedski entering the match. "It was the best I returned his serve. I really got a lot of balls back today."

Also advancing to the quarters were Gustavo Kuerten of Brazil and eighth-seeded Dutchman Richard Krajicek. Kuerten beat Sieng Schalken of the Netherlands 6-2, 6-3, while Krajicek sank compatriot Jan Siemerink 6-4, 6-4.

FIFA's two-day meeting on

ZURICH, Mar 12: International competitions for countries, clubs and youngsters all came under the spotlight at FIFA's executive committee meeting Thursday, reports AP.

World soccer's governing body began its two-day meeting facing the prospect of an Asian boycott of the 2002 World Cup over allocation of places, and concerns about next month's Youth World Championship over standards of medical care. Lennart Johansson, FIFA executive board member and president of the European body UEFA, said the allocation of places to Asia for the 2002 World Cup would be discussed at the body's extraordinary congress, planned for July 9 in Los Angeles.

Johansson added that he could not see Europe giving up one of its places for the 2002 event, which is due to take place in Japan and South Korea.

"I think they could have somewhere else if they tried," Johansson said.

The Asian nations are upset because they have been allocated four places for the 32-team competition, including the two automatic places for the host teams.

They believe they should at least be allowed a playoff against Oceania for another spot.

Graf clips Rubin's wings

INDIAN WELLS, California, Mar 12: Steffi Graf survived her first real test of the tournament, coming back from a shaky start to defeat Chanda Rubin in the Evert Cup semifinal, reports AP.

Graf needed less than an hour each to beat her first three opponents earlier in the week. On Thursday, she got her groundstrokes working late in the second set against Rubin and went on to take a 2-6, 6-4, 6-2 victory.

Lens fight for top flight pride

PARIS, Mar 12(Reuters/Internet): League champions RC Lens will be fighting for top flight pride on Saturday when they meet second division Laval in the third round of the French Cup.

Last year's losing finalists must win the home clash to ensure two first division sides reach next month's quarter-finals.

In the worst showing by first division clubs in the French Cup, only three reached the third round and two have been drawn against each other.

Metz, winners in 1984 and 1988, are at home to Nantes on Sunday.

Lens, having eliminated Olympique Marseille in both the League Cup and French Cup, have all three options still open for an immediate return to Europe after failing to reach the European Cup quarter-finals this season.

The champions are in top form again, having won five consecutive matches.

"We're in a spiral of success," club president Gervais Martel said. "Now we mustn't get carried away. We'll take it match by match like last year at this time. Things went very well then."

Striker Tony Vairelles is still out with a ligament injury. Defenders Eric Sikora and Cyrille Magnier, midfielder Mickael Debeve and Czech striker Vladimir Smicer should all be back after starting on the bench in Wednesday's 1-0 league win over Montpellier.

Metz, who made a disastrous start to the season after finishing runners-up to Lens in the league, are looking for a better ending.

"Since the resumption in January (after the winter recess), we've set ourselves one objective -- to get people talking about us again," coach Joel Muller said.

"As each round of the cups came along since January, we knew we could not afford to fail," Metz's Luxembourg defender Jeff Starsser said.

Along with Lens, Metz are also in the League Cup semifinals.

Metz will be glad of home advantage again for the visit of 1979 winners Nantes, whom they beat in the first round of the League Cup at their St-Symphorien ground.



Pallbearers carry the casket of Joe DiMaggio down the steps of Saints Peter and Paul Church in San Francisco on March 11.

DiMaggio laid to rest

SAN FRANCISCO, Mar 12 (Reuters/Internet): Baseball great Joe DiMaggio, long the most celebrated of American sports heroes, was honoured at a quiet, private funeral on Thursday as his family closed ranks against the public glare he shunned in life.

In San Francisco's Italian enclave of North Beach, DiMaggio's boyhood home, police kept fans and ranks of reporters cordoned off in a park across from the twin-spired St. Peter and Paul Church as about 60 relatives and close friends attended the invitation-only funeral.

But police could not contain the emotion of the crowd of about 300 who burst into spontaneous applause and shouted "bravo" as his casket was carried down the steps of the church where he received his first communion and married his first wife.

The casket was in a waiting hearse for burial at a suburban cemetery, as the church's bells tolled slowly.

"He had this mystique, and this mystery was just as much a mystery to him as it was to others," said Art Rosenbaum, 86, a former San Francisco Chronicle sports editor who knew DiMaggio as a boy.

The New York Yankees star who wore number 5, died on Monday in Florida at the age of 84 after a six-month battle with lung cancer.

The Hall of Fame centre fielder played for 13 seasons for the Yankees, where his teams won 10 American League titles and nine World Series. In 1941 he hit in 56 straight games, a record that has never been challenged and is considered one of the greatest in all of sports.

He was known as the "Yankee Clipper," but San Francisco has long laid special claim to native son DiMaggio, a relationship that was cemented when "Joltin' Joe" married screen siren Marilyn Monroe, at San Francisco City Hall in 1954.

While that marriage lasted only nine months, DiMaggio's love affair with his hometown continued and he was a frequent visitor to his close-knit family in the San Francisco area after retiring from baseball in 1951.

Much of that family, as intensely private as Joe himself, was present at Thursday's funeral Mass, where Dominic DiMaggio, Joe's younger brother and a Boston Red Sox centre fielder, delivered the eulogy.

The closed service, which DiMaggio himself requested, meant only those closest to him could pay their last respects.

Luminaries including President Bill Clinton, actors Tom Hanks and Jack Nicholson, and Yankees' principal owner George Steinbrenner all reportedly voiced interest in attending the ceremony, but were politely told to stay away by the DiMaggio family.

The funeral at the church marked San Francisco's final farewell to one of its favourite local heroes, a man hailed as a model gentleman and a "regular guy" who, while shy and aloof with the public, loved nothing better than sitting at a North Beach cafe with his boyhood friends.

"He gave (San Francisco) a good name," said 68-year-old Miguel Rangel, a former waiter who was among the observers outside the church. "It's the biggest thing he could do for the city, and for himself. He's one of ours."

Other onlookers recalled DiMaggio's reserved charm, a self-deprecating shrug he aimed at the culture of celebrity.

"The most amazing thing about Joe is he never said how good he was," said 88-year-old John Swenski, who said he frequently visited DiMaggio when he returned to San Francisco.

But attention was also focused on a darker side of the baseball great as reporters craned for a glimpse of DiMaggio's estranged only son, Joe Jr., who served as a pall bearer at the funeral despite years of tension with his famous father.

The younger DiMaggio, known as Joey D., has lived a life far removed from the usual style of celebrity families. Living in a trailer and working in a junkyard, 57-year-old Joey D. kept out of the media spotlight and away from his family, which includes two adopted daughters who DiMaggio was very close to.

Joey D. did not see his father in the last years of his life and he was left a relatively small 20,000 dollars in DiMaggio's will, according to news reports.

Nevertheless, the younger DiMaggio joined the rest of the family on Thursday to say goodbye to his father.

"You'd think that a man who had made so many people happy deserved to have a little more happiness in his own life within his own family," Stella DiMaggio, the wife of one of DiMaggio's cousins, told the San Jose Mercury News.

"Joe DiMaggio made a lot of kids happy, signing autographs, holding them on his lap and they were strangers to him. To not have that same joy in his life is what's really sad."

Real prepare for vital away days



MADRID, Mar 12(Reuters/Internet): Real Madrid are gearing up for two away games in the space of five days that could serve to make or break their season.

Saturday's league trip to Racing Santander is followed by European Cup quarter-final clash with Dynamo Kiev in Ukraine on Wednesday, a game Real must win after their tame 1-1 draw at home.

Coach John Toshack on Friday attempted to play down the importance of the European excursion, preferring to focus on the league trip to Santander.

But the Welshman, brought in last month to replace Dutchman Gus Hiddink, succeeded only in adding to the pressure on his beleaguered side when he admitted that anything less than a win would spell the end for their league hopes.

Defeat against Santander could leave Real 10 points behind leaders Barcelona, who should have too much for Espanyol when they clash in the Catalan derby at the Nou Camp on Sunday.

And Toshack conceded: "If we don't win in Santander then we'll have to start talking about second place in the league."

"I've said all along, though, that four victories in a row would leave us well placed to win the title. Seven points, with so many games to go, is not so far behind."

"So this match is absolutely key for us. The game against Kiev is still a way away so the only team that interests us at the moment is Racing."

Toshack's task at Real is to qualify for the Champions League, either by retaining the European Cup or finishing in the top four -- preferably the top two -- in Spain.

That achievement would give him a chance of staying on at the Bernabeu next season to start rebuilding Real.

Anything less, however, would be regarded as a disaster by club president Lorenzo Sanz and would almost certainly see the former Liverpool striker on his way out of Madrid for the second time.

Toshack has at least been helped by an easing of the injury crisis at the club, which earlier this week looked like leaving nine players unavailable.

taking place on Saturday.

Valencia -- who learned this week that they will lose coach Claudio Ranieri at the end of the season -- travel to take on inconsistent Real Betis.

Victory for the Valencians can then take them within a point of Barcelona and will start to give credence to their hopes of sending Ranieri away with a league title win.

Third-placed Celta Vigo will expect a result from their trip to Real Zaragoza, although they could be distracted by Tuesday's UEFA Cup date with Olympique Marseille.

Spain's two other European hopefuls, Atletico Madrid and Mallorca, line up against each other in the Spanish capital.

Mallorca, five points behind the leaders in fourth place, will be strong favourites against an Atletico side who have picked up just one point from their last six league games.

Barcelona's Sunday date with Espanyol will give the chasing pack added incentive to win their games, which are all

taking place on Saturday.

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World chess champion Gary Kasparov (R) receives the trophy after winning the Linares International tournament in Spain yesterday.

Juninho warned

MADRID, Mar 12 (Reuters/Internet): Atletico Madrid caretaker coach Carlos Aguiar has warned Brazilian ace Juninho he is not guaranteed his place in the side.

Juninho, who struggled to hold down a first team place under former coach Arrigo Sacchi, had looked forward to an extended run under his replacement.

But after disappointing displays in Atletico's last three league games -- from which the Madrid club have picked up just one point -- Aguiar has warned Juninho he will have to improve if he is to keep his "untouchable" status.

Juninho was one of the players who initially was an automatic first choice for me," Aguiar told Spanish sports daily Marca.

"But at the moment other players are showing me a lot more. Juninho had -- and still has -- my confidence but others are now proving themselves."

Juninho, who moved to Atletico from Premier League side Middlesbrough in 1997, came close to accepting a move back to England earlier in the season but was finally persuaded by Sacchi to stay on and fight for his place.

Pele's sympathy for Racing

BUENOS AIRES, Mar 12: Pele is backing the campaign to save ailing Argentinian club Racing which has been closed down by the Argentine courts because of huge debts, reports AFP.

The Brazilian football legend told the Thursday edition of Buenos Aires paper La Nacion that Racing Club was his favourite Argentine side, a surprise for many as the Buenos Aires side had many bitter duels with Pele's club Santos in the Copa Libertadores in the 1960s.

"My roots are in Santos, the club I love. But Racing is something special. It's people, it's fans," said the man regarded by most to be the greatest ever footballer.

Last week Racing Club was closed down after a creditor sued and the club has total debts of around 50 million dollars. The closure brought Racing fans out on the streets and an emergency meeting of Argentina's senate was held with the country's vice-president Carlos Ruckauf beginning a political initiative to save the club.

But Pele was less diplomatic when asked if there were any challenges to his status as the all-time greatest.

"When someone else has scored 1282 goals and won three world titles, when someone has done the same as I we will talk about it. There are many painters but only one Michelangelo."

WC 2002 to start ten days early

SEOUL, Mar 12: The 2002 soccer World Cup is expected to start June 1 for a 30-day run, about 10 days earlier than usual, South Korea's top soccer official said Friday, reports AP.

Chung Mong-Joon, head of the South Korean Football Association, reported the expected adjustment after a meeting with FIFA, soccer's world governing body, in Zurich, Switzerland, on Thursday.

The one-day meeting was called by FIFA to review arrangements for the 2002 World Cup with co-hosts Japan and South Korea.

"All agreed to avoid the peak rainy season in July," Chung said from Zurich in an interview with YTN, an all-news cable television network.

The quadrennial World Cup traditionally has started around June 10, after the professional soccer season in Europe and South America ends in April.

But that period overlaps the rain season in both Japan and South Korea.

At Thursday's meeting with FIFA, South Korea and Japan proposed starting the 2002 World Cup on May 24 or 25 but FIFA and the co-hosts agreed to make a one-week adjustment to begin it on June 1, Chung said.

A formal endorsement of the decision will be made by a FIFA executive meeting in Los Angeles in July, he said.



Promoter Don King is flanked by undisputed WBA and IBF champion of the world Evander Holyfield (L) and Briton Lennox Lewis, the WBC titlist, after the weigh-in at Madison Square Garden on March 11.

Unification bout after seven years

Holyfield vs Lewis



NEW YORK, Mar 12 (Reuters/Internet): More than 20,000 fans will swarm over Madison Square Garden on Saturday for the heavyweight boxing unification battle between Evander Holyfield and Lennox Lewis.

The bout would be a big-time event for any of several reasons: there has not been an undisputed heavyweight champion since Riddick Bowe seven years ago; the bout pits an American against a Briton; the careers of both men will be largely defined by the outcome.

But the main reason it has become a major happening is that it is a legitimate match up. So legitimate that scalpers are getting 5,000 dollars for ring-side seats that sold for 1,500 dollars before the Garden sold out two months ago. The fight is 49.95 dollars on pay-per-view cable television.

Holyfield will get 20 million dollars to risk his World Boxing Association and International Boxing Federation titles and Lewis is getting 10 million dollars to throw his World Boxing Council title into the pot.

Serious arguments can be made for either man to win.

One of the main points for Holyfield is that he has climbed so many heavyweight mountains before: "I'm a winner. Winning is what I do."

When he first moved up to the heavyweight division boxing experts dismissed him, saying he did not punch hard enough, got hit too often and was not all that fast. On top of that he liked to slug it out with much bigger men.

He lost two of three fights

against the much bigger Bowe. But they were epic battles that established Holyfield as one of the all-time ring warriors.

In 1996, Holyfield struggled for five rounds before finally stopping blown up cruiserweight Bobby Czyz.

It was that performance that encouraged Mike Tyson to take on Holyfield.

Holyfield pulled off a huge upset in knocking out Tyson in their first fight and so frustrated him in their second encounter that Tyson bit both of Holyfield's ears and was disqualified.

Now there is Holyfield the born-again Christian who seems to believe he is invincible in the ring. In fact, he has even boldly -- some say stupidly -- predicted he will knock out the 34-1 Lewis in the third round.

That is the same 33-year-old Lewis who outweighs Holyfield by 31 pounds (14 kg) and has an eight-inch (20 cm) advantage in reach. And it is the same Holyfield who has not knocked anybody out in the third round since Buster Douglas in 1990.

Holyfield (36-3) has to find a way to get inside Lewis' powerful left jab if, of course, he brings it to the Garden on Saturday.

His own trainer, Emanuel Steward, who says this bout will define Lewis' entire career, also says, "You never know which Lennox is going to show up."

But, in the opinion of many, if Holyfield, 36, tries to fulfill his prediction he will be helping Lewis.

Predicting a third-round knockout "was the craziest thing I've ever seen with him in 12 years," said Lou Duva, who helped train Holyfield earlier in his career.

Duva and others take Holy-

field at his word and think he will try for the knockout to join Muhammad Ali as the only three-time heavyweight champion.

If Holyfield presses for an early knockout, he will not be boxing Lewis as Duva thinks he should, getting angles, flitting in and then out of range. If he does not, Duva says, "it could be a one-punch deal. If he walks in, he's liable to get hit" with Lewis' very powerful right hand.

Lewis, of course, is far from a full-time juggernaut in the ring. He has had more than his share of safe fights, and his balance and stamina are suspect. Added to that he often just paws with his jab.

But he has been tutored for the last nine bouts by the highly-regarded Steward, who trained Holyfield before they fell out over money.

Lewis is awesome looking at 6'5" (1.95 metres) and 246 pounds (111.5 kg). At times he has been awesome in the ring. He first raised eyebrows with a 1992 destruction of Razor Ruddock.

Lewis suffered the lone defeat of his career when Oliver McCall -- trained by Steward -- knocked out the Briton in the second round in 1994.

Lewis' toughest fight was against Ray Mercer in 1996. He won on a controversial decision and gained respect for slugging it out with the very tough Mercer.

But Lewis has turned in less-than awesome performances recently, and Holyfield, too, was shabby in his last fight in September.

Both men, however, have a history of fighting up to the level of their opponents. If they do that on Saturday, the fight could very well be worth the seven-year wait.

Big three turn attention back to title chase



LONDON, Mar 12(Reuters/Internet): After a two-week diversion for European and domestic cup action, England's three title contenders return their attention to the premier league on Saturday with games any potential champions would expect to win.

Leaders Manchester United visit Newcastle United, Arsenal are at Everton while Chelsea entertain West Ham United.

United chalked up a 2-0 first leg European Cup quarter-final lead over Inter Milan and got past Chelsea by the same score in an F.A. Cup quarter-final replay on Wednesday.

Now they must ensure they don't mentally relax against a

resurgent Newcastle, themselves on a high after thumping Everton 4-1 in the Cup and following up with a 2-1 win at Nottingham Forest on Wednesday.

United manager Alex Ferguson has been trying to perfect a careful balancing act, resting key players when he can, as he again chases "the impossible dream" of League, F.A. and European cups.

He decided to start with his best team at Stamford Bridge and the move paid off as United produced a battling display to become the first away team to win at Stamford Bridge this season.

But with next Wednesday's return against Inter Milan very much in his sights, it would be no surprise if he again rested some of his troops.

Roy Keane could well start on the bench as the indefatigable Irish international will be absolutely vital to United's harrying game in the San Siro. Free-scoring Dwight Yorke, who has scored 26 goals since his 12.0 million pounds move from Aston Villa at the start of the season, could also miss out but Jaap Stam, another man vital to the European challenge, is likely to start to combat the threat of Alan Shearer.

Newcastle have found their form in recent weeks with just one defeat in 11 games and were worthy of their home draw with Arsenal two weeks ago.

Shearer is finding the net again and needs one more goal to become the first to score 150 since the formation of the premier league six seasons ago.

United lead by four points from Arsenal and Chelsea, who are split by goal difference but with Chelsea having a game in hand on the top two.

Chelsea player-manager Gianluca Vialli says that the bright side of Wednesday's defeat was that his team could concentrate on the league and a test of that concentration will come on Saturday.

A home game against West Ham is one they should win. Harry Redknapp's side are in consistency personified -- but at their best could pose a threat.

Arsenal, Manchester United's opponents in the F.A. Cup

semifinals, have a good record against Everton in recent seasons and indeed clinched the title by thumping them 4-0 at Highbury last May.

Little has changed for either club in the ensuing 10 months as Arsenal again won the league and Cup double and Everton are again fighting relegation.

Everton though are a more resilient side this season and will be buoyed by an important 2-1 win at Blackburn Rovers in midweek.

Although they have still managed just nine goals at home in the league all season, they have conceded only seven so a Goodison Park goalcast is not likely.

In the battle for European places Leeds United have looked the most impressive in recent weeks and will should continue the run at Yorkshire rivals Sheffield Wednesday.

Aston Villa, top two months ago, have picked up just one point from their last six games and hope the arrival of 5.5 million pounds (8.96 million dollars) Steve Stone from Nottingham Forest will kick start their season away against Tottenham Hotspur.

Ronaldo is fine

RIO DE JANEIRO, Mar 12: Ronaldo is cured of his knee ailment and can resume playing soccer immediately, according to his Brazilian trainer, reports AP.

"It only depends on his coach. He's ready to start," Nilton Petrone was quoted by the Rio newspaper Jornal do Brasil as saying.

Petrone, hired by Internazionale of Milan to care for their star player, denied rumors that Ronaldo had chronic tendinitis or anything that could end his career prematurely.

He said Ronaldo has what's known as "jumper's knee," a pain caused by excessive strain on the joint from sudden starts and stops. "It's nothing that can't be controlled or that represents a threat to his career," Petrone said.