

Napoli on sale?

NAPLES, July 6: A Rome businessman said yesterday he wanted to buy struggling Italian club Napoli for 100 billion lire (52.84 million dollars), reports Reuters.

Aurelio De Laurentiis, who owns a film production company, told a news conference he would pay 50 billion lire for the ownership of the club and a further 50 billion to underwrite the contracts and salaries of all current players.

Napoli are owned by businessman Carrado Ferlaino who has refused to sell his controlling stake despite intense criticism from fans.

Diego Maradona, who guided Napoli to their golden era in the late 1980s, offered to bail out the club last year but asked for the presidency in return and was denied by Ferlaino.

Napoli were relegated five months later and remained stuck in Serie B last season.

Former Napoli chairman Roberto Fiore was with De Laurentiis at the news conference and criticised Ferlaino over his handling of the club.

"He's brought Napoli to ruin, mixing his own personal business with that of the club," Fiore said. "The balance sheets are not transparent."

About 150 Napoli fans gathered outside to applaud De Laurentiis and demand Ferlaino's resignation.

Napoli won the Italian double in 1987 — the season Maradona joined them. They went on to claim the UEFA Cup in 1989 and a second championship title in 1990 but have won nothing since the former Argentine captain left in 1992.

Dokic's gain

SYDNEY, July 6: Australian tennis sensation Jelena Dokic is set to become a big winner with the corporate dollar following her exploits at Wimbledon, reports AFP.

The Sydney teenager has Australian and international companies clamouring to sign her to sponsor and endorsement deals, with her management group Advantage International already shifting through plenty of offers.

Her agent John McCurdy Tuesday said Dokic, who became Australia's first female Wimbledon quarterfinalist in 12 years, had enormous potential in the corporate marketplace, although he declined to put a dollar figure on his protégé.

Tennis is a very high profile sport which receives a lot of publicity.

"Jelena is only 16 and she is already number one in the country so she is going to be in the public eye for a long time," he said.

As a 16-year-old, Dokic is limited by the Women's Tennis Association's age eligibility rules to just 10 tournaments a year plus the grand slams and although this will increase next year, she won't be free to play the full WTA tour until she is 18.

Bimes doesn't want to be ITF boss

NOORDWIJK, Netherlands, July 6: French tennis federation President Christian Bimes has withdrawn from the list of possible successors to International Tennis Federation president Brian Tobin, reports AP.

A replacement for Tobin will be elected Friday at the ITF's annual general meeting being held in this North Sea coastal resort.

The ITF, tennis' international governing body, gave no reason for Bimes' withdrawal from the race. The Frenchman is still seeking election to the ITF's board of directors.

Among the six candidates for the presidency still in the race, the best known is flamboyant former star player Ilie Nastase of Romania.

Tobin, an Australian once ranked No 8 in his country and who played at Wimbledon in the early 1960s, is leaving the post after two four-year terms in charge.

The 68-year-old from Melbourne, home of the Australian Open, served as president of Tennis Australia from 1977-1989.

WTA Tour's top 20

ST PETERSBURG, Florida, July 6 (Reuters): Top 20 women's tennis players, according to the WTA Tour rankings issued after Lindsay Davenport's triumph in Sunday's Wimbledon final over Steffi Graf (previous ranking in brackets):

PLAYER	POINTS
1. (2) Lindsay Davenport (USA)	5,590
2. (1) Martina Hingis (SWI)	5,293
3. (3) Steffi Graf (GER)	4,500
4. (5) Venus Williams (USA)	3,474
5. (4) Monica Seles (USA)	3,411
6. (7) Mary Pierce (FRA)	2,639
7. (6) Jana Novotna (CZE)	2,340
8. (9) Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario (SPA)	2,128
9. (10) Amanda Coetzer (RSA)	1,942
10. (8) Nathalie Tauziat (FRA)	1,935
11. (13) Barbara Schett (AUS)	1,828
12. (11) Serena Williams (USA)	1,819
13. (17) Anna Kournikova (RUS)	1,744
14. (14) Dominique Van Roost (BEL)	1,685
15. (15) Amelie Mauresmo (FRA)	1,677
16. (16) Sandrine Testud (FRA)	1,677
17. (18) Julie Halard-Decugis (FRA)	1,669
18. (19) Patty Schnyder (SWI)	1,593
19. (20) Conchita Martinez (SPA)	1,553
20. (22) Elena Likhovtseva (RUS)	1,362

'El Loco' getting his due



LUQUE, Paraguay, July 6: Argentina striker Martin Palermo's dubious penalties in one match caused shares in his club side Boca Juniors to dive Monday - and brought him a mixture of ridicule and sympathy from fellow players and press alike, reports AFP.

Palermo's triple blunder, thought to be unprecedented at international level, in his side's Group C 3-0 Copa America defeat by Colombia led to a 4.68 percent fall in the value of shares in the Argentinian champions, much coveted by Spanish clubs he is seen as the club's most bankable asset.

Ironically 'El Loco' (the madman) Palermo's two goals in Argentina's opening win over Ecuador had seen shares in the Buenos Aires club rise by 3.5 percent.

As historians tried to establish if any other player had missed three spotkicks in a match at international level, the biggest names in South American soccer had their say on the incident that has provided arguably the biggest talking point of the already exciting Copa so far.

Argentina's most famous footballer Diego Maradona said: "At least he had the guts and courage to ask to take them.

Rather than blame Palermo one has to ask who is running the Argentine set-up (coach Marcelo Bielsa or Argentine Federation president Julio Grondona?)

Brazil and Inter Milan striker Ronaldo was astonished that the striker had volunteered to take the third penalty after not even getting his first two attempts on target.

Ronaldo said: "I have never seen such a big example of persistence. This insistence (on taking the penalty) will mark him a lot."

Brazil coach Wanderley Luxemburgo said: "This will mark him forever because he will remain known as a player who missed three penalties in an important football tournament."

Argentina coach Bielsa was more sympathetic to his striker saying: "He has the optimism of a goalscorer but he could not score."

Colombian player Oscar Cordoba, a team-mate of Palermo's at Boca, mused: "I was very anxious because it is not going well for my team-mate Martin Palermo but on the other hand I was celebrating an important victory for my team."

Argentinian striker Abel Balbo, who plays for Italian side Parma, said: "It is incredible to miss three penalties in the same match, poor Palermo, he won't be able to sleep but these things happen in football."

The media also had its say. Argentinian paper 'El equipo de El Grafico' said merely: "Palermo, sad story."

The Uruguayan media was scathing with La Republica describing the player as the Copa "laughing stock", saying "he does not know how to kick a ball".

With Argentina due to face Uruguay in their last Group C match Palermo could yet make his Biscaya neighbours pay for that remark.

Uruguay goalkeeper Fabian 'Hector' Carni, who could find himself squaring up to Palermo's next penalty - if he is allowed to take any more, said: "Missing three penalties, it could have happened to anyone."



MARTIN PALERMO

Rios' staggering start



GSTAAD, Switzerland, July 6: A somewhat rusty Marcelo Rios struggled to overcome Bohdan Ulihrach 6-2, 6-7, 7-6 in the first round of the Swiss Open yesterday, reports Reuters.

Out of action with a thigh injury since a quarterfinal defeat by Dominik Hrbaty at the French Open five weeks ago, Rios began strongly, dominating the opening set.

But the 23-year-old Chilean soon began to show the effects of the layoff as he struggled with the high altitude at this Swiss resort, losing a second set tie-break 9-7.

In the deciding set the former world number one showed flashes of the form that helped him to clay court titles in Hamburg and St Poelten earlier this season but was still taken to a tiebreak before winning that 7-1.

"I feel physically fine but it was not a good match," said the

third seed. "There were a lot of mishit balls, the altitude was a bit of a problem."



MARCELO RIOS

A return to clay also meant a return to form for Spain's Albert Costa, Morocco's Hicham Arazi, American Vince Spadea and Frenchman Arnaud Di Pasquale.

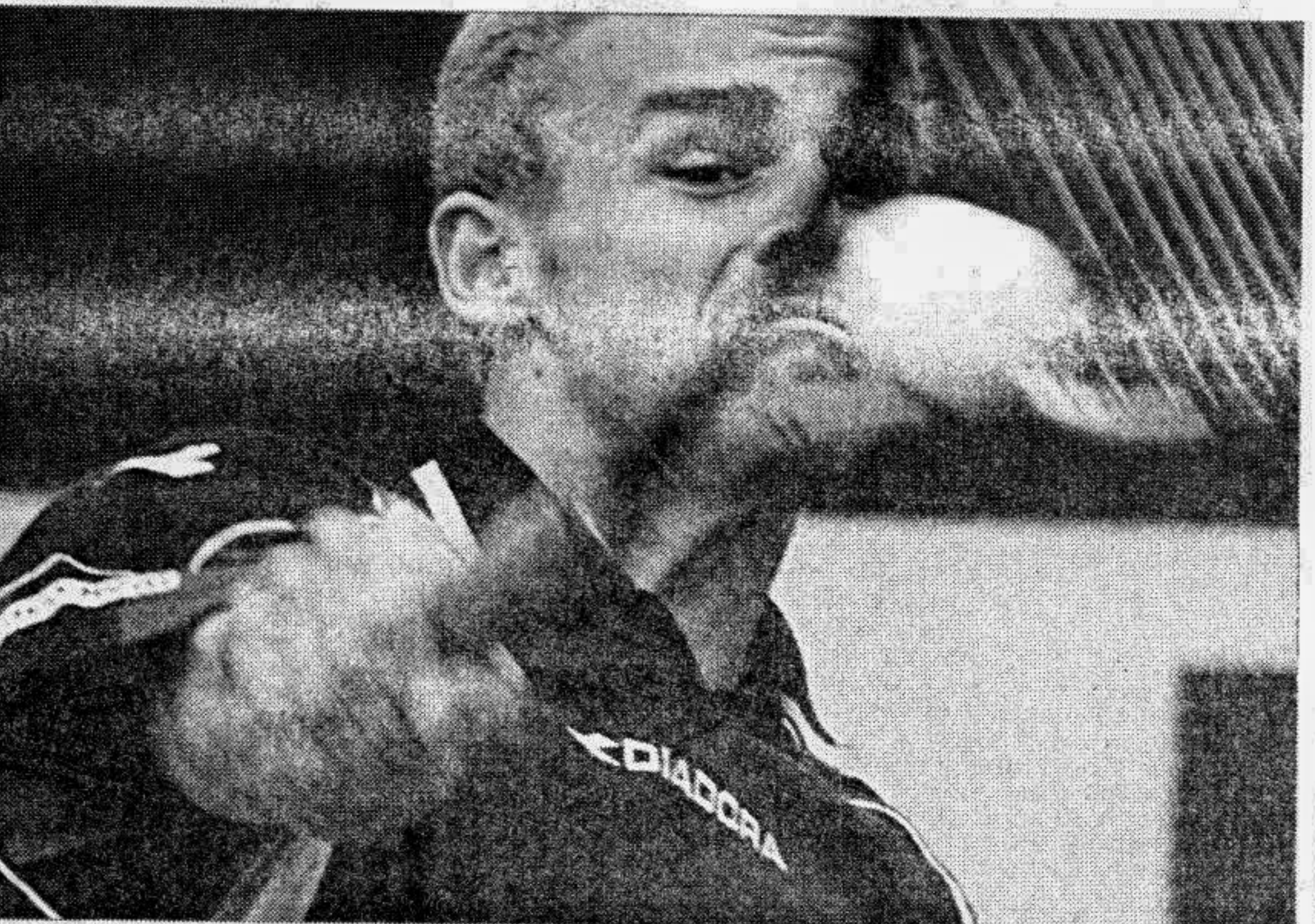
First round losers at Wimbledon, the four all moved smoothly into the second round. Di Pasquale was the only player to drop a set.

Costa, Swiss Open champion in 1996, demolished Switzerland's Lorenzo Mantia 6-1, 6-1.

The eighth seeded Spaniard, who was brushed aside in the opening round at Wimbledon by Briton Arvind Parmar, ranked 455th in the world, looked much more at home on his preferred surface, needing just 43 minutes to dispose of Mantia.

Di Pasquale, Tim Henman's first victim at Wimbledon, also enjoyed his return to clay, beating French Open semifinalist Fernando Meligeni of Brazil 6-3, 5-7, 6-0.

Spadea, who reached the third round of the French Open, eliminating fifth seeded Dutchman Richard Krajicek along the way, brushed aside Italy's Renzo Furlan 6-3, 6-2 while Arazi swept past Czech Jiri Novak 6-3, 7-6.



Brazilian Gustavo Kuerten makes a backhand return in his first round match against Argentina's Mariano Puerta at the Swiss Open yesterday. —AFP photo

SA's merits and demerits

LOS ANGELES, July 6 (AP): Being on the African continent is helping South Africa in its bid to become 2006 World Cup hosts. It also is the No. 1 drawback.

"The biggest problem we have is the general perception against Africa," said Danny Jordaan, the leader of South Africa's bid committee. "That's it's inept, that it's corrupt, that it's disease, it's hopelessness. South Africa is different. We came with different solutions to the problems of colonialism and racism."

"We didn't go through final destructive phase of flattening the country, which has happened in 80 per cent of Africa."

With FIFA President Sepp Blatter repeatedly and openly announcing his support for the 2006 World Cup to go to the African continent, and with most believing that South Africa has a clear infrastructure advantage over fellow continental bidder Morocco, many consider Jordaan's bid to be the one to beat.

Germany and England are considered to be its biggest rivals, while Brazil also remains in the race. But with Africa never having hosted a World Cup, many are of the belief that the continent should be next, and in many people's opinion, that means South Africa.

"It's not pressure," Jordaan says. "The requirements will be the same for all of the candidates. We have the infrastruc-

ture. We have the capacity. We will meet FIFA's requirements. We will exceed FIFA's requirements."

FIFA general secretary Michel Zen-Ruffinen says there are many elements that will go into any successful bid, and that no bid will be perfect. But foremost in the bid will be the technical requirements, such as stadiums, telecommunications, lodging and transportation.

And while FIFA realises it has an obligation to spread the gospel of soccer and promote its growth in places where it is not with the 24-member Executive Committee to decide on the 2006 host in March.

Jordaan says he is aware of the perceptions regarding African sports administration, and he and his group are prepared to prove that South Africa will not suffer from some of the same problems its neighbours have in staging world championship events.

"The World Cup is a business, and business parameters must be in place," he said. "We will present a business plan, a budget that will demonstrate that a World Cup in Africa is a safe bet."

Besides the general perceptions of the African continent, Jordaan also knows he must overcome the fears about crime and safety, particularly in cities like Johannesburg.

Jordaan says Johannesburg is like any other major cosmopolitan city, with good and bad areas, but South Africa is more than capable of keeping its problems to a minimum.

"We have the capacity in the military police," he said. "We have one of the biggest military police forces in the world. Our history depended on the military police in enforcing the apartheid regime."

"We must convince the Executive Committee that personal security, and the security of the event, is a top priority."

South Africa already has hosted major events successfully such as the 1995 Rugby World Cup and will get more practice when it stages the 2003 Cricket World Cup.

"If the matter is decided on meeting FIFA requirements, the logical choice must be South Africa," Jordaan said. "It will provide for the ascendancy of African football in a new millennium."

Chelsea splash out £10m for Sutton

LONDON, July 6: Chelsea said yesterday they had signed unsettled Blackburn Rovers striker Chris Sutton for 10 million pounds (15.76 million dollars), reports Reuters.

He has agreed a six-year contract with the English Premier League club.

Sutton, who played only 20 games last season because of injury, had been transfer-listed at his own request after Blackburn were relegated last season.

After completing his move to the high-profile London club, Sutton said: "This is a massive move for me. I'm sure Chelsea are going to win things."

"When I heard they had come in for me I was very keen to get to London as quickly as possible. I've always admired the way Chelsea play and I hope I fit in."

Chelsea manager Gianluca Vialli said: "Ten million pounds is a lot of money but I think sometimes you have to spend money if you want to improve the team."

"I have no doubt he will be a great asset to the club and will score a lot of goals."

Sutton, who made one brief appearance for England as a substitute against Cameroon in November 1997, was recalled to the international fold by coach Kevin Keegan for the European Championship game against Poland in March. But he was unable to play because of injury.

The fee is the third largest between two English sides. Only Newcastle United's Alan Shearer and Manchester United's Dwight Yorke cost more.

Newcastle paid Blackburn 15 million pounds for Shearer and United paid Aston Villa 12.6 million pounds for Yorke.

A sellout women's WC final

LOS ANGELES, July 6: Women's World Cup organizers sold the remaining 500 tickets for the championship match between the United States and China, making the title doubleheader at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena a sellout of more than 85,000, reports AP.

The balance of the unsold tickets went rapidly Monday after the United States 2-0 semifinal victory over Brazil in Stanford on Sunday, World Cup spokesman Steve Vanderpool said.

Attendance at the final, to be played at the same venue that hosted the 1994 men's World Cup final between Italy and Brazil, should eclipse the 78,972 that attended the Women's World Championship opener in Giants Stadium outside New York City on June 19.

The match will be played as a doubleheader with the third-place game between Norway and Brazil scheduled to precede the championship.

Attendance for the first 30 games of the third Women's World Championship has reached 567,982, an average of 35,499 per event. Except for the semifinals, the Women's World Cup has been played with all games as doubleheaders. Even the semifinals were paired with other games, joined on the programme with US Major League Soccer league matches.

Sprint aces set for showdown

ROME, July 6: World champion Boldon and Olympic champion Michael Johnson will race each other over 200 metres for the first time this year when the Golden League comes to Rome on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

The prospect means that the half-lap race looks set to overshadow the 100 metres sprint, where world record holder Maurice Greene is overwhelming favourite to win.

"Yes I'm going to run the 200," Boldon told reporters this week. "With Michael Johnson there I've got my work cut out for me. I've already teased Maurice that he's got the easiest job of the two of us here."

Boldon said the regretted his decision would deprive the crowd at the Olympic stadium of seeing him run against his friend and training partner Greene.

"But it's just not possible for the two best runners in the world to race against each other week in, week out," he said.

"I think Maurice and I pride ourselves on being sprinters rather than 100 metres runners and sprinters have to prove themselves over different distances."

Ono in doubt for Japan

TOKYO, July 6: Japan's soccer squad could be without key midfielder Shunji Ono during the final qualifying round for the Sydney Olympics. It was disclosed today, reports AFP.

The 19-year-old Urawa Red Diamonds player was to have an operation on a torn ligament in his left knee today and needs three months to recover, according to his team doctor.

Ono was tackled from behind during the match against the Philippines in the Asian group six tournament on Sunday and was stretched off when Japan were leading 6-0 in the 31st minute.

The Japanese side appeared to lose their rhythm without Ono but still went on to win 11-0.

"I'm going to concentrate on my rehabilitation to get ready by the time of the final qualifying round," said Ono, who scored seven goals from eight games.



NUMBER THREE: Chris Sutton (L), Chelsea's ten million pound signing, poses with manager Gianluca Vialli at the club's Stamford Bridge ground in London on July 5. —AFP photo

Tennis looking forward

LONDON, July 6 (Reuters): One of the finest Wimbledon championships for years saw the abdication of the old guard of women's tennis but reports of the 'death' of the game's king, Pete Sampras, proved to be wildly exaggerated.

Sampras' 6-3, 6-4, 7-5 defeat of Andre Agassi in Sunday's final was stunning in its style and execution.

The 27-year-old American has been beaten just once on Wimbledon's grass in the past seven years and he seems a new man since taking six months off to put his life back in order.

Sampras is now talking of playing until his early to mid-30s and by then he should have left Roy Emerson's record of 12 Grand Slam titles, equalled on Sunday, far behind.

Agassi is world number one as of Monday but everyone, including the shaven-headed Las Vegas, knows who is the best — today, in the 1990s and maybe since Rod Laver 30 years ago.

Sampras' win was a fitting culmination to two weeks of tennis that showed the men's game, often portrayed as second best to the charismatic women, can still thrill with the likes of Agassi, Gustavo Kuerten and Pat Rafter.

If Agassi can maintain the 'roll' that took him to the French Open title and on to the All-England final, then he will be a major threat to Sampras and double-champion Rafter at the US Open starting next month.

Rafter came up against Agassi at his best in the semifinals at Wimbledon but he has developed into the best serve-and-volleyer in the men's game and has lost his fear of grass.

Steffi Graf's decision to slip into semi-retirement after losing the women's final 6-4, 7-5 to Lindsay Davenport brought the curtain down on one of the great

grasscourt careers, and on a generation of players.

In their place come a mob of teenagers, led by Martina Hingis, the Williams sisters, Mirjana Lucic and new arrivals Jelena Dokic of Australia and American Alexandra Stevenson.

Graf, 30, won the French Open last month but two hard weeks at Wimbledon — including one of the matches of the tournament against Venus Williams in the quarterfinals — left her mentally and physically exhausted.

It is likely she will retire for good in the next few months, choosing her time when the media cannot swamp her, and it is all but certain Monica Seles, Jana Novotna, Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario and Graf will not add to their haul of Grand Slam titles — 35 between the four of them.

Seles looked a forlorn figure after she lost in the third round to 17-year-old Lucic. Seles is only 25 but the death of her father and the lingering effects of her court-side stabbing in 1993 have doused her fire.

Novotna is 30 like Graf and she will almost certainly have to content with her one major title, Wimbledon in 1998. Sanchez-Vicario, 27, is a woman whose game was based on an unquenchable spirit and an ability to run for ever.

But the manner of the Spaniard's semifinal defeat in Paris by Hingis and in the second round at Wimbledon by Lisa Raymond showed her batteries have finally begun to run down.

Hingis' hiccup at Wimbledon, where she was beaten in the first round by Dokic, was the sensation of the tournament and spawned untold column inches about the pressures at the top mother-daughter relationships and warden Mar-

McEnroe went on to win three singles titles and Stevenson has the baseline power to be a real force over the next decade.

Dokic, 16, has the same power but she also has a mental approach among the most single-minded in the game and a killer drop-shot. A qualifier this year, she could be seeded in the first championships of the new millennium.

Neither among the old guard or the new, is the immediate future of women's tennis after not losing a set on the way to her first Wimbledon triumph.

The 23-year-old has been a different woman since winning the US Open last year, relaxed and confident in her own ability, and the depth and power of her baseline ground strokes throughout two weeks of Wimbledon was outstanding.

Chinese have high hopes



constant errors. An error in the first half, there were two opportunities which the players didn't maximize. If we did, the game would have been easier."

China, though, was still impressive enough to earn the nod from Norwegian coach Per Mathias Hogmo.

"There's no doubt that China beat the USA already twice, so I think they will be favourites in the final," Hogmo said. "But they will meet a very enthusiastic American team so I think it will be an interesting fight."

The United States must find a way to stop Sun Wen, whose two goals Sunday tied her for the tournament lead with Sissi of Brazil with seven.

It also will have to cope with China's team speed. In the first half, Zhao Lilong repeatedly sped up the left side past her defender and made crossing passes.

The Chinese "are very good on free kicks and corner kicks and the US should watch out for that," Norway's Linda Medalen said.

Liu Ailing's two goals that made the score 2-0 and 4-0 both came off corner kicks.

The Americans also must

had an easy start but they, but was sharp several times in the second half when Norway had offensive opportunities.

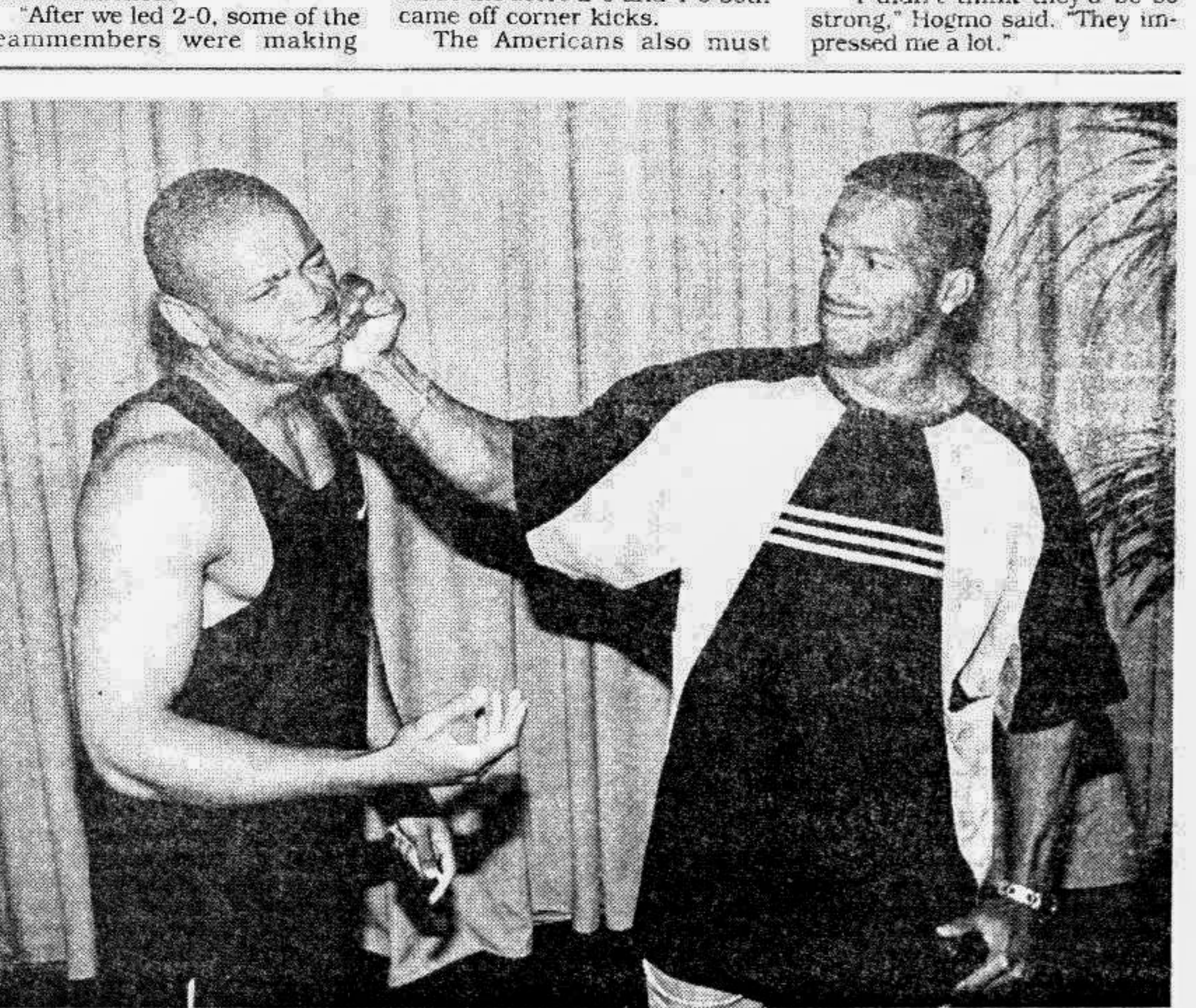
"Norway was the best team we played in the tournament, but we play with a sense of spiritual unity," said Gao, who has three shutouts as China has outscored opponents 19-2 in going 5-0. She has not faced a tough test since a 2-1 win over Sweden in her World Cup opener.

The Americans also must be careful from the start. They fell behind 1-0 to Nigeria in the first round and 2-1 at halftime to Germany in the quarterfinals. An early deficit may not be so easy to overcome in the final.

China have a 2-1 record against the United States this year. They last met April 25 in East Rutherford, New Jersey, where China won 2-1. Ma hopes his team can play next Saturday the way it did then.

"The Chinese team has the confidence to play a very good game," he said.

"I didn't think they'd be so strong," Hogmo said. "They impressed me a lot."



FRIENDLY FIST: Trinidad's ace sprinter Ato Boldon (R) pretends to take a swipe at his American rival Maurice Greene at a press conference in Rome on July 5 ahead of the Golden League meeting. —AFP photo