

MU eyeing Asian market

LONDON, July 21: (Reuters): Manchester United, the world's wealthiest soccer club, is looking to extend its brand and merchandising activities into Asia, the Financial Times reported today.

Quoting the English club's managing director Michael Farnham, it said Old Trafford megastores, which stock United merchandise, were being planned for cities across Asia. The newspaper said the first was to open in Singapore later this year, followed by Hong Kong and Jakarta.

Talks were under way with three potential Chinese partners for stores in the People's Republic, it said.

The United team is currently in China for a friendly against Shanghai Shenhua which the club hopes will cement its appeal in the Far East.

Once the club had opened stores in Beijing and possibly Shanghai, it would begin manufacturing its merchandise in China, the newspaper said.

Zidane hopes to be there

BUENOS AIRES, July 21: FIFA world player-of-the-year Zinedine Zidane is poised to top the bill at a match to mark the retirement of Uruguayan forward Enzo Francescoli, it was announced Tuesday, reports AFP.

The match, which will pit Francescoli's last club River Plate, based in the Argentinean capital, against the player's favourite club Penarol of Montevideo.

Zidane, born in Marseille, has frequently said he hero worshipped the Uruguayan when he played in the French first division club. And France's World Cup winning playmaker even named his son Enzo.

Organisers said Zidane's club side Juventus had said he could attend the gala match.

Francescoli played in Argentina, France and Italy as well as his homeland and was a member of Uruguay's World Cup squads in 1986 and 1990.

Fed Cup Doki's partner yet to be named

SYDNEY, July 21: Australian captain Lesley Bowrey said Wednesday she had yet to decide who would partner Wimbledon quarterfinalist Jelena Doki in the doubles of this week's Fed Cup qualifier in Amsterdam, reports AFP.

Bowrey, who is making her Fed Cup debut, said she had not yet decided whether Nicole Pratt or Alicia Molik would partner the Yugoslav-born Doki, who burst into the spotlight at Wimbledon after ousting top seed Martina Hingis in the first round.

But Bowrey said she was confident of securing a berth for Australia -- ranked No. 2 behind Belarus in the Amsterdam qualifier -- in next year's Fed Cup.

"It's going to be a tough week for all the teams, possibly playing four days in a row," Bowrey said in a statement released by Tennis Australia.

"But the girls have been hitting well in practice so I think we've got a great shot at getting into the World Group next year." Just 16, Doki is Australia's top-ranked player at 39 and carrying Australia's Fed Cup hopes.

Bowrey said she and the rest of the Australian team were up to the task set to begin later Wednesday against Argentina.

"It's almost one year ago to the day that we beat Argentina 5-0 in Canberra without dropping a set," Bowrey said.

Jelena and Nicole made fantastic debuts in the singles and they've got more cup experience under their belts now, as has Alicia, so they're more than ready."

The first 12 qualifying spots for the Fed Cup have been filled by Austria, Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland and the United States.

This year's winner will automatically progress to the semi-finals in 2000 with the remaining 12 nations vying for the other three positions.

President makes Perec available

PARIS, July 21: France's triple Olympic champion Marie-Jose Perec is virtually certain to return to the track here at the IAAF Golden League meeting on Wednesday following a telephone call from French President Jacques Chirac, reports AFP.

The 31-year-old, who has been suffering from Epstein-Barr virus, a type of glandular fever, last competed on August 6, 1997, in the quarterfinals of the 200m at the World Championships in Athens.

"I think there is an 80 per cent chance of Marie-Jose Perec running," meet organiser Raymond Lorré said.

"I think I have convinced her to run in the B race and as far as I am aware her coach John Smith is not against the idea," he added.

Perec had missed a meeting with Lorré on Monday night but explained that it was because Chirac had phoned her -- although she didn't divulge what the conversation was about.

Perec, a two-time Olympic champion at 400m and also winner of 200m gold in Atlanta, had originally planned to run in Salamanca last week but said after discussing her return with coach Smith last Saturday that it had been decided to run over the shorter distance.



Veteran German captain Lothar Matthaeus (L) and teammates warming up during a training session in Guadalajara, Mexico on July 20 ahead of their Confederations Cup opener against Brazil on July 24. — AFP photo

Milan sets eyes on Europe

CARNAGO, Italy, July 21: AC Milan slaked their claim to the European Cup held by Manchester United here on Tuesday, as the Italian champions began preparing for their centenary season, reports AFP.

Coach Alberto Zaccheroni and club officials, congratulated by hundreds of fans who converged on their training base here, are convinced they have an even better team than last season, and are setting themselves no limits.

Vice-president Adriano Galliani said: "It's a fantastic season for us because it's our centenary, you'll recall that the club was founded on December 16, 1899, and because the dream we had last year of playing this season with the 'scudetto' (league) badge sewn onto the shirts, came true."

Paying tribute to Zaccheroni, who won the league title in his first season after Milan had been through two years of torture, he added: "We went from 10th place to first. And we are very proud of him."

Zaccheroni was more interested in the future, saying: "Our aim is to finish in the top four in the Serie A -- to ensure ourselves a place in the Champions League again next season -- and in the Champions League this season, we want to go as far as we possibly can."

"We are starting out with a good dose of enthusiasm, and

winning the league last season has given us extra confidence. "I'm personally pleased to have been kept on," he said with a grin, "the players have stayed and the season ticket sales shows that the fans are with us too."

"We've got a balanced team, self-belief and we've got the certainty that we have added a number of good players. They will enable us to take a step up, in terms of quality," he insisted.

The club have made nine new signings, seven of them Italian, as part of the club's recent policy of looking for local talent, plus Brazilian midfielder Serginho and Ukrainian striker Andrei Shevchenko, bought from Dynamo Kiev.

"There are seven teams who have a chance of winning the championship, and all of them have been strengthening their squads, and all have made a particular effort in their forward line," Zaccheroni said.

"It's something we have to get used to. There are more clubs now who are capable of finding the financial resources needed to put together a highly competitive team."

Skipper Paolo Maldini, who has already won three European Cups with the club, most recently in 1994, said: "It's great to be back in Europe. And to be coming back through the front door."

Milan will make that return wearing replica shirts of the first ones ever to be worn by the club, which was founded by an

Englishman Alfred Edwards, as "Milan Cricket and Football Club."

The shirts, with narrow red and black stripes, plus a full button-up collar and the City of Milan insignia on the chest, will only be used for the European ties.

The centenary celebrations, christened "100Milan" and featuring a museum exhibition plus cultural and charity events, will be kicked off at San Siro stadium on Wednesday night, when the whole squad will be presented to the fans.

Zaccheroni, who has taken Milan supporters to a different planet since becoming coach, is due to drive onto the pitch aboard a replica moon-buggy.

Milan's pre-season matches start next week, and as Galliani pointed out: "We are going to be particularly busy in August when we are playing against some of the best teams in Europe."

After two years without official European football, Milan will play an exhibition tournament in Paris with Paris St Germain and Bayern Munich (Aug 2), a friendly in Leverkusen against Bayer (Aug 6), and another in Trieste against Benfica (Aug 13) before meeting old foes Juventus for the Berlusconi Trophy (Aug 17).

Their first official match will be the Italian Super Cup against Parma (21 Aug), the weekend before the Serie A starts.

Henman to wed in Dec

LONDON, July 21: British tennis ace Tim Henman is to wed his girlfriend Lucy Heald, The Express newspaper reported on today, says AFP.

The sportsman, who has legions of female fans in Britain, got down on bended knee to propose to television producer Lucy, 26, while the couple were on holiday in Tuscany, Italy.

Friends said the pair have been inseparable since they met two and a half years ago, but have only once managed to spare time to go on holiday together, the paper reported.

Henman, 25, was knocked out of Wimbledon earlier this month after a gruelling semi-final match against Pete Sampras.

The couple are set to marry in December, in order to fit in with Henman's hectic sporting schedule, said the paper.

Scott Draper's wife dies

GOLD COAST, Australia, July 21: Rising Australian tennis pro Scott Draper was mourning the death of his 23-year-old wife after she succumbed to complications brought on by a lifelong battle with cystic fibrosis, his manager said Wednesday, reports AFP.

Kellie Draper, 23, died Monday morning after she was rushed to a Gold Coast hospital. Draper's manager Peter Smylie said.

"She was a beautiful girl who was full of life and she was so supportive of Scott," Smylie said.

"Healthwise she had her ups and downs her whole life but she was rushed to hospital from something that suddenly came up. It caught everyone by surprise."

Kellie was the daughter of Draper's long-time coach, John Grieg.

The pair married in December 1997 in front of a who's who of Australian tennis including John Newcombe, Tony Roche, Mark Philippoussis and best man Jason Stoltenberg.

Draper, 25, achieved a career high ranking of 44 last year.

He returned to training at Gold Coast home after playing at Wimbledon and was at her bedside when she died, Smylie said.

"He's unbelievable. He's trying to be the support for everyone else but deep down it's just tearing him apart," Smylie said.

"We're just trying to keep him as busy as possible and he's going to have a rough time ahead but he's got enormous support from the tennis world and his family."

Smylie said Kellie would have wanted her 25-year-old husband to continue his tennis career. But he said Draper had not yet decided whether to play in the US Open which starts August 30.

Good start for De Mos

TOKYO, July 21: Former Ajax Amsterdam coach Aad de Mos has begun his Japanese coaching career by guiding Urawa Reds to a 2-0 victory over league champions Kashima Antlers in a Nippon League Cup quarter-final first-leg tie, reports Reuters.

The 52-year-old Dutchman, who took over as Urawa coach this month after the dismissal of Hiromi Hara, had former Spanish international Altor Beguiristain to thank for Tuesday night's win.

In the 15th minute, Beguiristain led a swift counter-attack and clipped the ball over the advancing goalkeeper to make it 1-0.

Seven minutes before half-time, Reds added their second goal when Kenji Shibusaba after more organised opposition play from the Spanish veteran.

After the game, watched by a nearly full house of 15,444, De Mos said: "I am satisfied with the result because we put two goals past one of the best defences in Japan and didn't allow any at the other end."

"But we will need to play strongly as a team in the away leg on Saturday for this result to mean anything."

De Mos, asked for his first impressions of Japanese soccer, said: "I watched Japan play in the Copa America on TV in the Netherlands, and I was very impressed with the quality of their play."

"They had some problems down the sides in defence, but overall I thought their play in the field was brilliant, like the Brazilians."

Edwards to skip World C'ships

LONDON, July 21: World triple jump record holder Jonathan Edwards has pulled out of the British World Championships trials in Birmingham this weekend, reports AFP.

The British athlete, who has struggled with an injury to his left foot since the European Cup in Paris a month ago, feels he should not risk jumping with next month's World Championships in Seville, Spain fast approaching.

"It is purely a precautionary measure," said Edwards. "The injury has been niggling me since the Paris meeting and obviously I don't want to risk further complications with Seville being so close."

"For the time being, although I am training I am also taking every opportunity to make sure I am okay for Seville."

Despite missing the trials, Edwards is certain to be named, if fit, in the British team for the championships in Seville, which take place August 20-29.



An AFP file photo of British No 1 tennis player Tim Henman (R) and girlfriend Lucy Heald. The couple have decided to get married soon.

Rafter after 25 years

BRISBANE, Australia, July 21 (AFP): John McEnroe once called Pat Rafter a One Slam wonder -- and ended up with egg on his face.

Coaches were also left eating humble pie after warning the now accomplished serve-and-volley exponent to stay away from the net.

But those were those who doubted the 26-year-old Australian and two-time US Open winner would ever make it to number one in the world.

Nine years after joining the ATP tour at No. 444, Rafter will become the world's No. 1 ranked men's tennis player Monday when the tour's new rankings are released.

The popular Queenslander, who led from the front in Australia's 4-1 Davis Cup defeat of the USA last weekend, officially takes over tennis' top spot from flamboyant American Andre Agassi thanks to the quirks of the tour's points system, after hovering at No. 2 and No. 3 the past few years.

"He deserves it," says his proud mum and number one fan, Jocelyn Rafter.

"It's not something Pat really talks much about. Winning Davis Cup has always been number one with Pat, Wimbledon is number two and I guess being number one in the world comes after that."

Rafter will become only the 17th player since the volatile Ilie Nastase in August 1973 and the first Australian since current Davis Cup coach John Newcombe to hold the ATP's No. 1 ranking.

Newcombe was 30 when he was world No. 1 almost 25 years ago to the day.

Because neither Agassi nor Pete Sampras entered this week's Stuttgart tournament, Rafter officially moves to the top of the ATP rankings on Monday by 79 points.

But to stay there, he'll have to defend some big rankings points in Montreal and also in Cincinnati, two tournaments he won last year leading up to his US Open defence.

He moved into the world's top 50 in March of that year and eventually finished ranked No. 3 behind American Pete Sampras with another 2.7 million US dollars in prize money earned.

His results this year, however, have been solid rather than spectacular after a slow start.

He failed to fire up in the Australian Open in January, losing in four sets to Sweden's Thomas Enqvist in the third round and it wasn't until the Mercedes Super 9 in Rome in May that he found some form, eventually dropping the final to Brazil's Gustavo Kuerten.

An early exit from the French Open at Roland Garros and another hurried departure at the hands of Jan Siemerink in Germany the following week continued to frustrate his bid for the No. 1 ranking.

He had another chance to claim the top spot earlier this month before Agassi stopped him at Wimbledon, taking over from Pete Sampras, denying the American the chance to beat Ivan Lendl's record of 271 weeks at No. 1.

The big question now: Can he become the US Open since Lendl to win the US Open three times in a row?

His ATP Tour debut in 1991 in his hometown of Brisbane against Russian Andrei Chesnokov -- a 4-6 1-6 loss which earned him just one ranking point and his first prizemoney cheque of 2,340 US dollars.

It was a small yet significant step for the energetic, pony-tailed, unorthodox serve-and-

volleyer entering a world dominated by baseline sluggers.

He completed his apprenticeship year on the tour with a positive 5-3 win/loss record, a modest career bank balance of 4,890 US dollars in prize money and a world ranking of 358.

But Rafter's career didn't take off until 1997, the year he toppled Greg Rusedski to win the first of his two US Opens.

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Andre, Gustavo withdraw

STUTTGART, Germany, July 21: Top seed Gustavo Kuerten's hangover from a bitter Davis Cup week end worsened as the worn-out holder quit in his first set at the 1.05 million-dollar Mercedes Cup on Wednesday, reports AFP.

Officials and tournament doctors cited "total exhaustion" as the reason the Brazilian gave up trailing 2-5 to Swede Magnus Norman in their second-round match after 37 minutes.

"I had no power, no motivation, no game, I left everything I had in France last week," said Kuerten, who will return to rest, relaxation and light training.

Meanwhile, French Open finalist Andre Medvedev made a disastrous return to clay on Tuesday, withdrawing from his first-round match with an ankle injury.

Medvedev, who lost a

thrilling five-set final to Andre Agassi at Roland Garros last month, was trailing 7-5, 1-0 to Norway's Christian Ruud when he withdrew.

Kuerten arrived in Stuttgart after Brazil's heart-breaking 3-2 Davis Cup quarter-final defeat by France in the southern French town of Pau. He played a five-set match against Sebastian Grosjean (Friday, 9-7 in the fifth) and a couple of three-set matches in singles and doubles.

The world No. 5 -- Kuerten's career-high ranking -- went 1-1 in singles and was on the losing side in doubles.

"I gave all I had at the Davis Cup. I need time to rest," said Kuerten.

The 22-year-old said that he has also pulled out of the Canadian Open, the next Super 9, starting August 2.

"I'll rest, train and rebuild. I've played a lot of matches and pushed myself," he said. "It's tough the week after you play all three days of Davis Cup. I

would have liked to have had a week free, but I wanted to come here and defend my title."

"Now, I'll go home and recover from the stress of tennis. I'll do what I want and come back motivated for the hard-court season."

The victory gives 23-year-old Norman -- who played the early years of his career with a heart-valve condition -- a 2-0 mark against Kuerten.

The world No. 49 Swede beat the Brazilian in a Challenger in Sicily four years ago and has never lost a set in the series.

Kuerten said he plans a return at the Cincinnati ATP tournament starting August 9 on hardcourt in the United States.

Wednesday's match was the first for Kuerten this week after a first-round bye at the Weissenhof club.

Kuerten headed a field of clay-courtiers, with Carlos Moya on second and Chile's Marcelo Rios third.

Locals come first for champs

CARNAGO, Italy, July 21: Foreign players look set to become a rare species at champions AC Milan after the Serie A giants' decision to buck the trend and buy Italian, reports AFP.

Much of the blame for the club's troubles in previous seasons has been laid at the door of foreigners who haven't fitted in, who've been floored by the language barrier, the style of football and a new way of life.

By contrast, the team's three revelations last season were all young Italians -- goalkeeper Christian Abbiati, defender Luigi Sala and midfielder Massimo Ambrosini, who subsequently broke into the national side.

Club vice-president Adriano Galliani said on Tuesday that Milan have taken things a stage further by signing seven Italians and just two foreigners -- Brazilian Serginho and Ukrainian Andriy Shevchenko -- for next season.

"With the support of our president Silvio Berlusconi, the club has decided to Italianise the squad more, while at the same time keeping an eye on talent from outside Italy," he said.

"If a great talent like Andriy Shevchenko is born in Kiev, then he is welcome at Milan, as is Serginho from Sao Paulo. But clearly we have a strong Italian base to the team and that's something we want to increase further, though we also want to

add top foreign players."

"Let's not forget that the great Milan side of the early years (of Berlusconi's presidency) was the team of Baresi, Costacurta, Maldini, Tassotti, Donadoni and Ancelotti, but it was also the team of Gullit, Rijkaard and Van Basten."

"We are faced with a global market and we don't want to isolate ourselves. So the attitude is a majority of Italians, but an eye on talented players wherever they are born."

Coach Alberto Zaccheroni was keen to stress that he too wanted an essentially Italian team.

"I set three criteria for our moves on the transfer market," he said. "Firstly, the players

must be good, secondly they must be young and thirdly, if possible, Italian."

"I know that foreigners might have more appeal, but you can also find good players in the Italian championship."

The issue of foreign players is an increasingly sensitive one in Italy, ever since the "Bosman" ruling in 1995 by the European Court which allowed clubs to sign unlimited numbers of European Union (EU) players.

Italian soccer and government officials have supported moves to persuade the EU to re-establish limits on foreigners, arguing for an exception to legislation on the free movement of workers.

However, Galliani doesn't believe that such limits -- as recently sought by FIFA president Sepp Blatter -- will see the light of day.

Speaking personally, with a team that's got more Italians in it than other clubs, such a thing would be to our advantage. So if I was thinking purely of Milan, then I'd say yes to it."

"But it would require a change to the Treaty of Rome and the unanimous support of all the countries in the European Community."

"And as you know, footballers are considered as workers now and the idea of ending their right to work within the European Union, as citizens of the EU, I think would be something extremely difficult to make happen."

Real's soccer TV rights sold

MADRID, July 21 (Reuters/Internel): Spanish television company Sogetel, which controls Canal Plus Espana and Canal Satellite Digital, said on Wednesday it had bought the rights to Real Madrid's domestic soccer matches for five seasons from 2003.

Sogetel did not say how much it had paid under the deal which also gives it an option to buy the rights to Real Madrid's league and Spanish Cup matches in the 2008/09 season.

Last month rival digital platform Via Digital made a similar deal with Barcelona.



Iranian internationals Vahid Hahemian (L) and Mehdi Mahdavia posing for photographers during presentation of new signings of the Bundesliga club Hamburg yesterday. — AFP photo

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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