

Notts close in on Shoab

NOTTINGHAM, England, Sept 8 (AFP): English county Nottinghamshire said on Wednesday they were set to complete the signing of Shoab Akhtar, the world's fastest bowler, within the next few days.

Double swoop for Cagliari

MILAN, Sept 8: Italian club Cagliari boosted their attack on Wednesday by signing two men from Serie A rivals Fiorentina, striker Luis Oliveira and playmaker Domenico Morfeo, in a deal worth around five million dollars.

Sardinia will hold few surprises for Oliveira, a Brazilian-born Belgian international who previously spent four years there, joining Cagliari in 1992 from Anderlecht and going on to score 41 league goals.

Cagliari's current coach, Uruguayan Oscar Washington, was there for one of those seasons, in 1994/95. Oliveira has a contract until the end of the season, leaving him free to re-sign or leave at no cost to a new club.

Morfeo, who had only just returned to Fiorentina after helping AC Milan to win the league last season has a contract through to 2002.

There was no room for either man this season at Giovanni Trapattoni Fiorentina after the club bought two new strikers, Yugoslav Predrag Mijatovic and Enrico Chiesa over the summer.

The two newcomers joined Argentinian centre-forward Gabriel Batistuta and Portuguese playmaker Manuel Rui Costa at the Florence club, leaving Trapattoni with a wealth of attacking options.

Shearer appalled

WARSAW, Sept 8: England captain Alan Shearer on Tuesday blasted as 'criminal' the decision to publish a controversial book by former Football Association chief executive Graham Kelly in the week of England's final European Championship qualifier, reports AFP.

Shearer was criticised as being 'childish and immature' by Kelly in his book 'Sweet FA' for his reaction after being charged with misconduct for kicking Leicester's Neil Lennon towards the end of the 1997-98 season.

The England captain, who was later cleared of the charge, told a news conference in Poland: "It is criminal that it has been released at this time to cause maximum damage to myself and maximum disruption to an England side which is focusing on such an important game."

"I'm sure everyone, ourselves, the fans, wants to concentrate 100 percent on the game and getting a good result, which I believe we can."

Asked if he had got the row out of his system, the Newcastle striker replied: "It wasn't in my system."

"There might be a time in the future when I tell my side of the story but now is not the time."

At his book launch on Monday, Kelly claimed he had no influence over when his book would hit the streets or be serialised.

He said: "It is entirely outside my control. I signed a contract to do the book six to eight months ago."

"It didn't appear to do Alan Shearer any harm and there are far bigger things that are going to rock the boat if the book is going to be rocked."

Forest have cash plenty

NOTTINGHAM, England, Sept 8: English First Division side Nottingham Forest on Tuesday told player-manager David Platt he still has money to spend after the club's plc announced a profit of 1.3 million pounds (2 million dollars) for the last financial year, reports AFP.

Forest have turned around the loss of 4.4 million pounds in the previous year and that, coupled with a major cash injection by businessman Nigel Doughty, has given Platt greater spending power.

Martin's midnight miracle

NEW YORK, Sept 8: Todd Martin made an astonishing wretched hour comeback, scoring 20 of the final 21 points and rallying from the brink of defeat to stun Greg Rusedski in a five-set US Open thriller on Tuesday, reports AFP.

The 29-year-old American, who dropped nine games in a row to lose the first two sets, was two points from defeat in the third before recovering for a 5-7, 0-6, 7-6, 6-4, 6-4 victory that was among his greatest.

"It's the only one I can remember at this time. It was great," an exhausted Martin said seconds after winning. "I went out to a late lunch I guess. I was just fortunate I was able to recover from that."

Minutes later, a semi-conscious Martin received intravenous fluids and was barely able to talk, the recovery having drained him.

Martin's midnight miracle took three hours and one minute and came before barely 2,000 people who lingered Tuesday long after most who watched Venus Williams and Martina Hingis book a women's semifinal date.

Seventh seed Martin, who took intravenous fluids Monday after battling a stomach virus, made 29 winners and only two unforced errors in the last two sets. Ninth seed Rusedski fell apart with 11 fifth-set unforced errors.

"I definitely should have won that match. Todd didn't win that match. I lost that match," Rusedski said. "He raised his game in those big moments. I didn't raise my game. I went down. Obviously I'm upset because I should be in the quarterfinals and I'm not."

Martin, whose best Grand Slam result was second at the 1994 Australian Open, reached his third Slam quarterfinal of the year after going so far only once in the past four years.

He will try for a semifinal berth against 95th-ranked Rusedski, who played no hard-court tune-up but reached his first Grand Slam quarterfinal with a 6-4, 7-5, 5-7, 7-5 victory over fellow Czech Jiri Novak.

Rusedski broke Martin for a 6-5 lead in the first set, the second of nine games in a row won by the British serve-smasher on the day after his 26th birthday.

Martin, unshaven and weary, appeared a totally beaten man. Rusedski squandered two break points in the seventh game of the third that would have put Martin two breaks down, then came within two points of victory on Martin's serve at 30-30 in the ninth game but failed to capitalise again, setting the stage for his collapse.

Martin broke Rusedski to pull even at 5-5, then both held to force the tiebreaker. After a service winner on the final point, Martin raised his ovation.

"That got me going," Martin said. "It was a great moment." The other quarterfinal pairing was set with Brazilian fifth seed Kuerten to face France's Cedric Pioline.

Kuerten dodged a bullet when Swede Magnus Norman became the event's ninth player lost to an injury, retiring three points into the second set with a strained lower back after dropping the first set 7-6.

"I was very, very lucky. He was playing better than me," Kuerten said. "I thought he was really hurt. I just put the ball back and he was hurting so he couldn't get the ball back."

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The USTA Tennis Centre named its new main court after the late Arthur Ashe, who won the 1968 US Open, the first in the open era, and 1975 Wimbledon titles.

At Roland Garros, the No. 1 court is named after French great Suzanne Lenglen.

Margaret Court's name has also been mentioned as a possibility for Melbourne Park.

Now 57, Court, won a record 24 Grand Slam singles titles, including 11 Australian Opens, 19 doubles and 19 mixed doubles.

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Chapple strikes early blow

LONDON, Sept 8 (Internet report): Glen Chapple struck two early blows for Lancashire today in their battle to claim the PPP healthcare championship runners-up spot against fellow contenders Kent at Old Trafford.

The former England A seamer dismissed openers Ed Smith and Robert Key in an opening spell of 6-0-25-2 to restrict Kent to 21 for two after they decided to bat in a game both sides need to win to stay in contention of the £45,000 prize money for finishing second in the table.

Lancashire, who lie fourth just three points adrift of second-placed Leicestershire and four points ahead of fifth-placed Kent, suffered an early blow with England opener Michael Atherton withdrawing after suffering a blow on his foot during Monday's CGU National League victory over Hampshire.

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Yates found turn and bounce from an early stage of his spell but it failed to prevent Wells lofting him over long on for consecutive sixes to bring up the 50 partnership in stunning style.

Italian Davis Cuppers

ROME, Sept 8: Italy's non-playing Davis Cup skipper Paolo Bertolucci named a four-man team here on Tuesday to face Finland in this month's play-off to stay in the World Group, reports AFP.

Bertolucci, who watched Italy lose last year's final to Sweden in Milan, opted for Andrea Gaudenzi, Diego Nargiso, Gianluca Pozzi and Davide Sanguinetti for the showdown in Sassari, Sardinia from Sept 24-26.

Sforza asked to quit

COLOGNE, Sept 8: Kaiserslautern have told their Swiss-born captain Ciriaco Sforza he is free to find himself a new club after publicly criticising all-powerful coach Otto Rehagel, reports AFP.

Sforza is away with the Swiss national team at the moment preparing for a Euro 2000 qualifier against Belarus and is not expected back in Kaiserslautern until the end of the week.

He sparked uproar a week ago though when he told a number of journalists that Rehagel was outmoded in his tactics, lacking an overall concept and too authoritarian in his dealings with the team.

Attempts to smooth over the rift have failed miserably with Sforza insisting he has nothing to apologise for and that he was merely stating the brutal facts to get the club back on track.

Sforza, who formed the heart of the side which won last year's Bundesliga title, has found a slow groundswell of support within the team for his views but none have been brave enough to openly say so. Reports that a secret list is circulating at the club with names being gathered of players who agree with Sforza have been denied.

UK Athletics kicks up a row

LONDON, Sept 8: UK Athletics has embarked on a collision course with the world governing body after its decision to clear former Olympic champion Linford Christie of a doping offence, reports Reuters.

The 1992 Barcelona 100 metres winner was exonerated by a three-man disciplinary committee of the British governing body on Monday after testing positive for the steroid nandrolone last February.

Athletics, the major sports of the Olympic Games, has been hit by a series of drugs scandals this year.

The most prominent have involved Christie and Merlene Ottey, the Jamaican sprinter who has won more World Championships medals than any other athlete.

Ottey withdrew from the Seville World Championships last month after testing positive for nandrolone. She has denied taking any banned drugs and vowed to fight to clear her name.

A statement from UK Athletics on Monday said the disciplinary panel had cleared Christie of all charges because it could not be proven that the substance found in Christie's urine had been caused by nandrolone.

"It could not be proven beyond reasonable doubt that the substance present in the sample was derived from a prohibited substance," the statement said.

The explanation is unlikely to satisfy the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) which did not accept a similar finding in the case involving Britain's European 200 metres champion Doug Walker.

Walker had also tested positive for nandrolone, one of a series of positive cases involving the steroid this year across a variety of sports.

He was cleared by UK Athletics but the IAAF called the decision erroneous and has referred it to its arbitration panel.

"The criteria is whether a substance is in the body or not," said IAAF general secretary Istvan Gyulavari.

Two years ago the British Athletics Federation went bankrupt, partly through legal costs incurred during the Diane Modahl doping case.

The 1990 Commonwealth 800 metres champion was first banned, then cleared of taking the male sex hormone testosterone.

Civil actions by athletes found to have taken drugs, notably American former 400 metres world record holder Butch Reynolds, was one of the main reasons behind the IAAF's decision to move its headquarters from London to Monaco, where it is not subject to English or European laws.

"With greater commercialisation there were more civil suits," an IAAF official said on Tuesday. "Athletes always say they are innocent, then they sue."

UK Athletics spokeswoman Jayne Pearce said on Tuesday it had not been proven beyond reasonable doubt that the substance found in a urine sample taken from Christie after an indoor meeting in Germany last February had been caused by nandrolone.

Pearce said two other substances, which were not on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) or IAAF banned lists at the time of the test, could have caused the positive result. The substances have since been placed on the IOC banned list and will be added to the IAAF's.

"The substance found in the urine sample could not be clearly related to a banned substance," Pearce said.

Pearce said UK Athletics accepted the principle of strict liability.

"We agree with strict liability as well, if there's a banned substance," she said. "But there were two other substances as well as nandrolone which could have caused the finding."

The IAAF Doping Commission will now study the document relating to the Christie decision and make a recommendation to the IAAF Council which is due to meet in the third week of November. The Council can then refer the case to its arbitration panel.

The British decision will also be noted with interest by other sporting federations which have banned athletes who have tested 'positive for nandrolone.'

They include Czech tennis player Petr Korda, the 1998 Australian Open champion, and France's Olympic judo champion Djamel Bouras.

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Venus, Martina meet in semis

NEW YORK, Sept 8: Venus Williams has never missed a US Open semifinal and this year will be no exception.

The tremendously athletic American ended the impressive run of 12th seed Barbara Schett of Austria with a 6-4, 6-3 victory on a wind-swept Tuesday night at Arthur Ashe Stadium to advance to the semifinals for the third consecutive year, reports Reuters.

"Last year I was unable to go past the semifinals but this year I'm looking forward to doing better," said the confident third seed.

The victory for the 19-year-old propelled her into a final-four showdown with world number one Martina Hingis in a rematch of the 1997 final.

Hingis captured that title, but it signalled a coming-out for the then 17-year-old Williams, who became the first player to reach the final in her US Open debut since Pam Shriver 19 years earlier.

"I'm ready to go. I'm sure she's ready to go. Who knows, maybe she's out on the practicing court right now," joked Williams.

Hingis claimed her fourth consecutive final-four berth with a stunningly easy 6-2, 6-0 victory over unseeded German Anke Huber earlier Tuesday.

Huber had planted seeds in her previous two matches — Jana Novotna (8) and Amelie Mauresmo (15) — and had visions of upsets dancing in her head after taking the first two games from Hingis.

Those thoughts quickly evaporated as the Swiss sensation, having figured out the stadium's swirling winds, proceeded to reel off 12 straight games to claim her fourth successive semifinal berth here.

"I thought maybe in these conditions, she's going to miss a little bit more," Huber said. "But she just didn't make any easy mistakes or any mistakes at all."

"I was surprised by myself how easy it went," admitted Hingis, who conceded all of 12 points in the second set.

"I think I'm just playing well here. I feel confident and also I have reason to," added the top seed.

Schett also had reason to feel confident, but it didn't help her in her first match on the US Open's main stage.

The Austrian, toiling amid the chaos on the sprawling tennis centre's outer courts, had dropped a total of just nine games in her first four matches and had lost her serve only once on the way to her first career Grand Slam quarterfinal.

But under the lights in the huge stadium, Williams' remarkable ability to cover the court and her more extensive big-match experience proved too much for the talented 23-year-old from Innsbruck.

"Every match I've played I had to play in the wind except for one, so I was ready for it," Williams said.

Woodforde said they were in some ways victims of their own success.

"There are other teams out there that just get to see us play a heck of a lot," he said. "When someone sits down and dissects your game plan, you have to come out with something. We have to be inventive."

TODD'S CLAIM

Todd Woodbridge, who took himself out of Australia's Davis Cup quarterfinal tie, is clearly still smarting that Aussie captain John Newcombe hasn't recalled him for the upcoming semifinals.

"I haven't had any communication with the team," Woodbridge snapped when he and longtime doubles partner Mark Woodforde were asked about their expectations for the semifinal against Russia in Brisbane later this month.

Woodforde has been named, and could even wind up playing singles if injuries to Pat Rafter, Mark Philippoussis and Lleyton Hewitt prevent them from playing.

The squad also includes Andrew Ilie and Sandoz Stolle. Woodbridge was clearly put out that neither Newcombe or coach Tony Roche had talked to him, especially since all have been in New York for the US Open.

BRAZILIAN BACKERS BUOY KUERTEN

Gustavo Kuerten, somewhat surprised to find himself in the quarterfinals of the US Open on Tuesday, isn't surprised by the band of Brazilian fans enlivening his matches.

"There's a lot of Brazilians living here already, also we see a lot of people that come from Brazil just to watch tennis," the fifth seed from Florianopolis said. "They help me a lot."

He said the best turn-out was for his third-round victory over Goran Ivanisevic.

Guga wasn't surprised to see so little green and yellow in the stands for his Tuesday morning match, in which Magnus Norman retired with a back injury after losing the first set.

OPEN NOTEBOOK

NEW YORK, Sept 8 (AFP): Dynamic doubles duo Mark Woodforde and Todd Woodbridge will go without a Grand Slam title for the second year in a row after losing in the quarterfinals at the US Open on Tuesday.

The Australian pair, who won at least one Grand Slam doubles crown every year from 1992 through 1997, fell to Canadian Sebastien Lareau and American Alex O'Brien.

"When we play well, I still think we're the best team out there," Woodforde said. "We haven't been able to maintain a high standard this year throughout a tournament."

Woodforde, the elder of the two, says he plans to stop playing at the end of the year 2000, but both said that wouldn't increase the pressure next year.

"I don't think it's pressure. I think it's a challenge," Woodbridge said. "When you know you can just go full bore, give anything you've got, that's a challenge. A positive way to go at it. There's a finish line everywhere. It's like, go hard to the finish."

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