

Sparta thrash Spartak, Real win, Porto go down

UNDATED, Nov 4: In the European Champions League pools E-H contested Wednesday night, already qualified teams like Spain's Real Madrid...

In Group G, Bordeaux's match in Holland with Willem II Tilburg was a drab goalless affair.

But Sparta top the group after a 5-2 victory in Prague. They took control of their match with Spartak Moscow...

After 34 minutes Viktor Bulatov pulled one back for the Russians before Artem Berzodny squared the match on half-time.

Milan Fukal put the home side back in front four minutes after the restart before a penalty converted by Vladimir Labant after 63 minutes made it 4-2.

With Real Madrid and FC Porto already qualified Group E also had a marginal interest.

Real, aiming for an eighth continental crown, took a 43rd minute lead in Norway against Molde through French World Cup winner Christian Karembeu and held on to win 1-0.

Karembeu's goal ensured the meringues topped the pool at the expense of FC Porto, who lost to Olympiakos in Athens thanks to a Stelios Giannakopoulos goal after 56 minutes.

On Tuesday Groups A-D were wrapped up. Italy's Lazio and Fiorentina, Spain's Barcelona, Ukraine's Dynamo Kyiv, Norway's Rosenborg, Holland's Feyenoord, England's defending champions Manchester United and France's Marseille qualified from those groups.

Pain is better than surgery for Petit

LONDON, Nov 4: Arsenal's French midfielder Emmanuel Petit believes he can play for the rest of his career with the aid of pain-killing injections in order to avoid surgery on his knee ligament injury, reports AFP.

Doctors have advised Petit that he needs an operation to fully repair a damaged cruciate ligament which has already kept him out for nine weeks and 13 games this season.

But with three comeback matches now under his belt, the pony-tailed Petit insists he is ready to battle on against Tottenham in the big North London derby at White Hart Lane on Sunday, and for the rest of the season.

Petit, 29, looked to be back to his all-action best for Arsenal in their 3-2 Champions League win over AIK Solna in Stockholm on Tuesday. His performance followed two tentative comeback attempts against Chelsea and Fiorentina last week.

At the weekend he missed Arsenal's goalless Highbury draw with Newcastle to fly back to France for specialist treatment to his left knee including a surgical-injection similar to the technique which repaired Gunners' skipper Tony Adams' back problems last season.

Petit said: "I don't want an operation. I want to stay on the pitch and I believe I can go on for the rest of my career with pain-killing injections."

Doctors have said an operation is the only real solution but lots of players I know go on and on despite strains in their knees.

"It was a frankly awful pitch in Stockholm and sometimes it still hurts when I kick the ball, but then the pain can go away."

"I know it will probably come back from time to time but I feel I have to carry on. That's what I want and I think I can live with some pain now and then. It was important to prove that to myself."

"You never know what can happen with an operation. It can take a long time to recover and I just want to keep playing because we still have so much to achieve at Arsenal."

FA wont penalise Ruddock

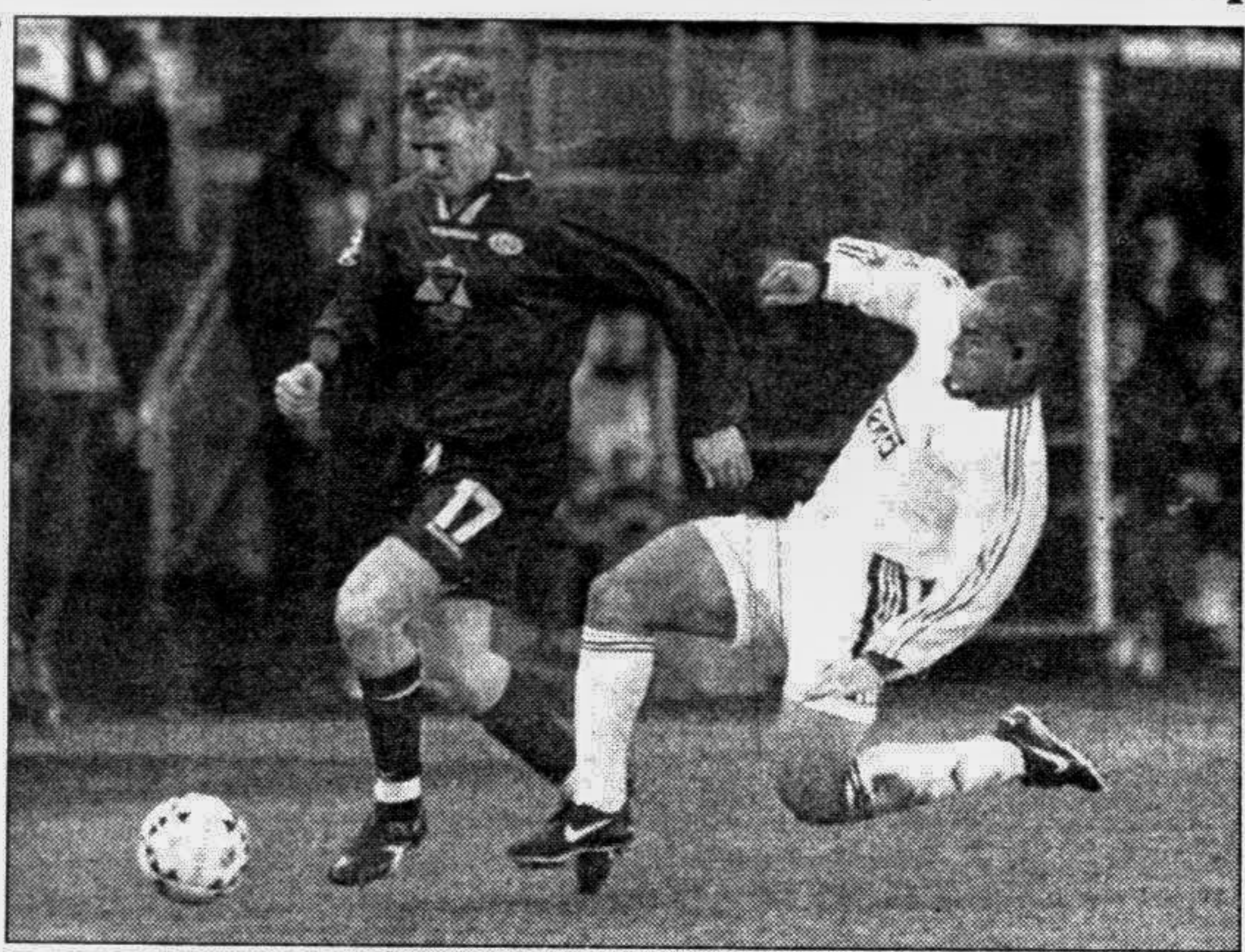
LONDON, Nov 4: The English Football Association (FA) are to take no action against West Ham defender Neil Ruddock over remarks he made about Arsenal midfielder Patrick Vieira following their infamous Upton Park bust-up, reports AFP.

Ruddock met FA compliance officer Graham Bean on Wednesday to discuss the comments made on television in the aftermath of his being spat on by the Frenchman in the Premiership clash on September 3.

When asked in a television interview about the spitting incident, Ruddock had quipped: "Vieira missed but was near enough for me to smell the garlic on his breath."

That was interpreted in some quarters as a racist comment, but after Wednesday's meeting FA media relations manager Steve Double said the FA was not penalising Ruddock for his remarks and he was not racist - as his many black friends in the game will testify.

"However, he was reminded of his responsibilities towards his fellow professionals and the matter is now closed."



Real Madrid's Roberto Carlos (R) is about to execute a lunging tackle on Molde's Trond Strande during their Champions' League match on Wednesday. — AFP photo

New format disturbs Keane

LONDON, Nov 4: Manchester United captain Roy Keane said on Wednesday the new format of the Champions League had made the competition less intense than last year, reports AFP.

Although United finished top of Group D, they have struggled to motivate themselves for games against the likes of Sturm Graz and Croatia Zagreb whereas a year ago they were playing Barcelona and Bayern Munich.

The new format, which includes two round-robin stages before the quarter-finals compared to one last year.

"I think the buzz hasn't been the same this year and the intensity has not been there," said the United skipper.

"That's because of the fact that if you lose a game you always have a chance of getting back into it, whereas before if you lost a game you were straight out."

"Sometimes when you play the lesser teams you lack concentration and give the ball away too easily because you know you will get it back again quite quickly."

"That maybe has been in the back of our minds during these games."

"You have to raise yourself against the better players because you know that you will get pushed and I think with the next stage, the intensity will come back."

The so-called big boys will be meeting each other and hopefully that will get the players up for it.

"With no disrespect to the teams in our group we've struggled against them and against Zagreb at home and Marseille at home it was hard to get going."

"I think the fans are looking forward to playing some of the so-called big boys and so are the players."

Of the big teams among the remaining 16 teams, Keane is most wary of Barcelona.

The Spanish champions finished top of Group B, which contained Arsenal and Fiorentina, with 14 points.

Louis van Gaal's side recorded four wins and two draws in their six games and they also scored an impressive 19 goals.

"Without a shadow of a doubt they will be there or thereabouts and they seem to be hitting top form," he said.

"If you get a chance to watch the other Champions League games on television you do try and pick up a few pointers."

"But from what I've seen, Barcelona don't seem to have any weak points at the moment."

Keane has also identified Lazio as another serious challenger to United's title, although they will avoid the Italians for the moment because both teams will be among the top seeds in Pot 1 for Friday's second-phase draw in Geneva.

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Schmeichel for a fair fixture

MANCHESTER, England, Nov 4: Denmark keeper Peter Schmeichel said on Wednesday for football's governing bodies to sit down together and work out a fixture list which is fair on the players, reports AFP.

Schmeichel left English Premiership side Manchester United in the summer because of the rising number of games and the burden has increased further this season because of the expanded Champions League.

The 35-year-old, who plays for Portuguese side Sporting Lisbon, welcomes the changes to the Champions League, but claims the game's administrators should not forget about the players.

Schmeichel, in Manchester promoting his new autobiography, believes the increased fixture burden is taking its toll on several clubs around Europe and that FIFA, UEFA and the various national associations need to act.

Several of United's players looked like they could do with a rest after they struggled to beat Sturm Graz in their final Champions League group game last night.

"I could foresee this that the games would be non-stop," said Schmeichel.

"Also internationally with the European Championships and the World Cup there will be more games as well because there are more countries in the qualification groups now than there were 10 years ago."

"All this means more games and I think what has to happen now is that everybody has to sit down around the table and negotiate the right format for the domestic leagues, the Champions League, the European competition and the World Cup so that everybody gets the right format."

"Because it might be right for the Champions League, but not right for the domestic leagues."

"Even in Portugal it's difficult. They were seven points in front when they started playing in the Champions League and they have ended up third in their league."

"It all has to be worked out and it takes time."

The likes of United have learnt to cope with the crippling fixture list by assembling huge squads, but Schmeichel feels this has a down side.

"United and AC Milan started it about 10 years ago and they have two teams now," he said.

"In many ways that's a shame because it takes some of the quality of the domestic leagues away."

"Teams take players away from other teams to have as many players or whatever you want to call them."

Schmeichel believes another way to help the players would be to harmonise each country's domestic season as far as possible to provide proper breaks.

"I've said many times that the Premiership should synchronise the starting point and finishing points of the season to the rest of Europe because that would help so much," he said.

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Juve ready to part with Delle Alpi

TURIN, Italy, Nov 4: Juventus are preparing to quit the Delle Alpi here and build a stadium of their own at nearby Borgaro. Tuttosport reported on Thursday, as the club's battle with Turin city council continues, reports AFP.

In a country where soccer grounds are owned by the local authorities, Juventus and neighbours Torino have talked about leaving the shared Delle Alpi for their own stadium for the past five years.

But a tug of war with Turin city officials is now expected to reach breaking point at a council meeting on Monday night, just 24 hours after this weekend's derby in the Serie A.

Juventus revealed last March that they wanted to demolish the 100 million dollar Delle Alpi and build their own 200 million dollar stadium, cinema, restaurant and conference complex 50 metres away.

The council appeared to go along with the idea but are now planning to make the non-stadium part of the development a public invitation to tender.

But a Juventus official told Tuttosport: "We cannot allow a third party to exploit our investment in the stadium."

And the club have now found enough land at Borgaro for the former world champions to build whatever they like.

However, in the tit-for-tat world of local Italian politics, city officials are already laying banana skins in the way of Juventus.

Councillor Ugo Perone said of Borgaro that: "The city of Turin certainly couldn't provide its traffic police or build new tramlines in order to guarantee that supporters could get there."

Juventus and Torino, who are hoping to have their demolished Filadelfia stadium rebuilt, are expected to make their positions clear during Monday's council vote on the future of the Delle Alpi.

The unloved stadium has been an expensive flop and dubbed "The Monument to Waste" by the Italian press.

Along with the building cost, which was triple the original estimate, its annual running costs of 1.75 million dollars and unused athletics track have made it unpopular with club officials and soccer fans alike.

Euro 2000 play-off Turkish squad for Ireland

ISTANBUL, Nov 4: Turkey manager Mustafa Denizli on Thursday announced his squad for the Euro 2000 play-off games against Ireland later this month, reports AFP.

Dropped from the squad are Besiktas' Ayhan Akman who recently returned from Germany where he was under treatment for a heel injury, and Oktay Dereloglu of second division's Sirt Jet-Pa Spor.

Once a star striker with Besiktas, Dereloglu made a surprising move earlier this year to Jet-Pa Spor, with whom he now says he has been "disillusioned."

Claiming the club went back on its word to send him to play in a European club, Dereloglu has abandoned his team and is hiding in Istanbul.

Called to the squad, meanwhile, are Galatasaray's Tugay Kerimoglu and Saffet Akyuz, who has been mostly kept in the substitute bench in the top Turkish outfit's league matches.

The first leg of the play-off will be on November 13 at Lansdowne Road and the return on November 17 in Bursa.

TEAM Goalkeepers: Rustu Recber, Engin Ipekoglu (both Fenerbahce) Defenders: Alpay Ozalan, Ogun Temizkanoglu, Saffet Akbas (all Fenerbahce), Ali Eren Beserler (Besiktas), Fatih Akyel, Hakan Unsal (both Galatasaray), Mert Korkmaz (Galatasaray) Midfielders: Abdullah Ercan, Tayfun Korkut, Sergen Yalcin (all Fenerbahce), Tayfun Havutcu (Besiktas), Okan Buruk, Tugay Kerimoglu, Ergun Penbe, Umit Davala (all Galatasaray) Strikers: Arif Erdem, Hakan Sukur, Saffet Akyuz (Galatasaray), Umit Karan (Gencerbirligi)

That alone "will change my life for ever" said Agassi after

that win. But his quest for perfection pushed him to write another appendage to that chapter of tennis history in the knowledge that he cannot dwell on his French Open triumph, a special but fading memory.

"I think what happened here in June was so special for what it was of that time and I'll never try to re-live that on any level. That deserves a special place," Agassi said.

"For me to play here (at the Paris Open) is not about me trying to win again, it's about

improving and not rest on his laurels as he powers towards a fifth title in a year mark him out as a true champion.

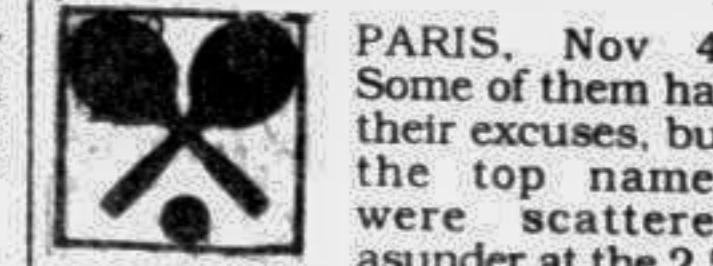
"It's been a great year and now is a time to assess a lot of things. I don't know what will motivate me now," he admitted.

"But I've been very much enjoying the challenge of accomplishing things I've never done before and I haven't done a lot of things. I haven't won Australia twice. I do care a lot about being better."

Open twice either -- but he is well on the way this week as he prepares for Thursday's third-round match against unseeded Dutchman Sjeng Schalken.

Come Sunday night, a second Paris title could be in the bag -- and that'll be one thing less missing on the ever-growing curriculum vitae.

Sampras sidelined Seeds tumble at Paris



PARIS, Nov 4: Some of them had their excuses, but the top names were scattered asunder at the 2.5-million-dollar Paris Open at the Palais Omnisports on Wednesday, as title holder Greg Rusedski and the man he beat in last year's final, Pete Sampras, returned to the home alongside six other seeds, reports AFP.

Both Sampras and Rusedski had a decent excuse for their early demise, as they withdrew through injury -- but amid their misfortune one man rose above them all.

Andre Agassi has little left to achieve in the game after

another seed in the shape of Karol Kucera, the Slovak 16th seed.

While Agassi kept the US flag flying high fourth seed Todd Martin took the number of ousted seeds to ten as he crashed in three close sets to Sweden's Thomas Enqvist, the 1996 title-winner.

A long hard season of wear and tear took its toll on the top names, meanwhile, as seven seeds, including Sampras and Rusedski, were scattered in the third day of the tournament, joining Gustavo Kuerten of Brazil, who lost Tuesday to Russian teenager Marat Safin.

There were further shocks after Hewitt's coup de grace against Kafelnikov as veteran Michael Chang, who had to qualify, swamped moody Chilean ninth seed Marcelo Rios 7-5, 6-2.

Double French Open champion Jim Courier bludgeoned his way past former world number one and 14th-seeded Spaniard Carlos Moya 6-3, 6-1.

Neither Moya nor Rios has ever even made the semifinals here.

Courier next plays Enqvist. It was a bad day for Spanish-speakers as British tenth seed Tim Henman forced his way through against Juan Carlos Ferrero, a 19-year-old Spaniard, in three sets.

Australia enjoyed a second success when Mark Philippoussis powered past eighth-seeded Dutchman Richard Krajcek 7-5, 6-3.

Philippoussis's reward is a match against Henman.

Paris double champion and third seed Sampras, coming back after some nine weeks out with a herniated disc injury which forced him out of the US Open, slept on it before deciding to call it a day with a back muscle problem despite edging out Spain's Francisco Clavet in a three-set thriller on Tuesday night.

Just two hours before his departure Britain's sixth seed Rusedski, who saw off Sampras in straight sets in last year's final, withdrew with hamstring trouble after losing the first set on the tiebreak in his second-round match against Albert Costa of Spain.

Rusedski's year is now over although world number three Sampras still hopes to make the season-ending ATP Tour Championship in Hanover later this month.

"I haven't made any decision yet. For now it's best to take a listen to my back and play it safe," said Sampras.

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