

Iranians leave for US adventure

TEHRAN, Jan 5: Iran's footballers left Wednesday for a tour of the United States...

The 21 players in the squad, headed by coach Mansour Pour-Heidari, will travel via Germany...

Ahead of the Pasadena friendly -- eagerly awaited as the Americans want to put the record straight after losing to the Iranians in the 1998 World Cup...

The Iranians will then move to Los Angeles for a match with Armenia, though the date has yet to be set...

Iran will not be short of support as California has a sizeable Iranian community which will not have forgotten June 21, 1998, when their heroes triumphed 2-1 in France.

Both countries are negotiating a tricky path towards normalising relations strained for two decades since the overthrow of the Shah and the rise to power of an Islamic fundamentalist regime...

But there has been a gradual rapprochement since the election in May 1997 of president Mohammad Khatami, who supports a policy of deeper international ties...

Gold Flake Open

Top seed falls at first hurdle

MADRAS, India, Jan 5: World number two Yevgeny Kafelnikov was knocked out of the first round of the Gold Flake Open on Tuesday...

Defending champion and fifth seed Byron Black of Zimbabwe also lost in straight sets, giving second seed Cedric Pioline, who made an effortless advance into the last 16, a clear shot at the title.

Russia's Kafelnikov, the top seed, went down 6-4, 6-2 to Czech Michal Tabara in a listless performance littered with unforced errors.

Tabara, ranked 122 in the world, had never won a match at this level despite winning three Challenger titles.

Kafelnikov said he had been unable to find his rhythm. "It's the first match of the year and my opponent was playing hard right from the beginning and didn't give me a chance to play my game."

Moya was distraught that the back trouble which forced out of last year's US Open had resurfaced right at the start of the new season.

"I had been practising back in Spain before I came here and it seemed that everything was okay. I practised yesterday and this morning when I felt the pain again and it was so bad I had to withdraw."

The Spaniard said the trouble appeared to be related to the stress fracture of a vertebra in the lower back that had first occurred four months ago.

He said he was flying straight to Australia, but it was unlikely he would play in Sydney or Melbourne.

"I'm going to have some X-rays when I get there and I'm always optimistic and there's still some time for the Australian Open. But if I'm not at 100 per cent I'd rather not play."

Moya said about the first Grand Slam of the year.

Rajshahi cricket

From Our Correspondent RAJSHAHI, Jan 5: Friends Ideal Cricket School beat Friends Circle Cricket Club by two runs in the fifth Bir Shrestha Captain Mohiuddin Jahangir Smriti Tournament at the Rajshahi Railway Colony ground today.

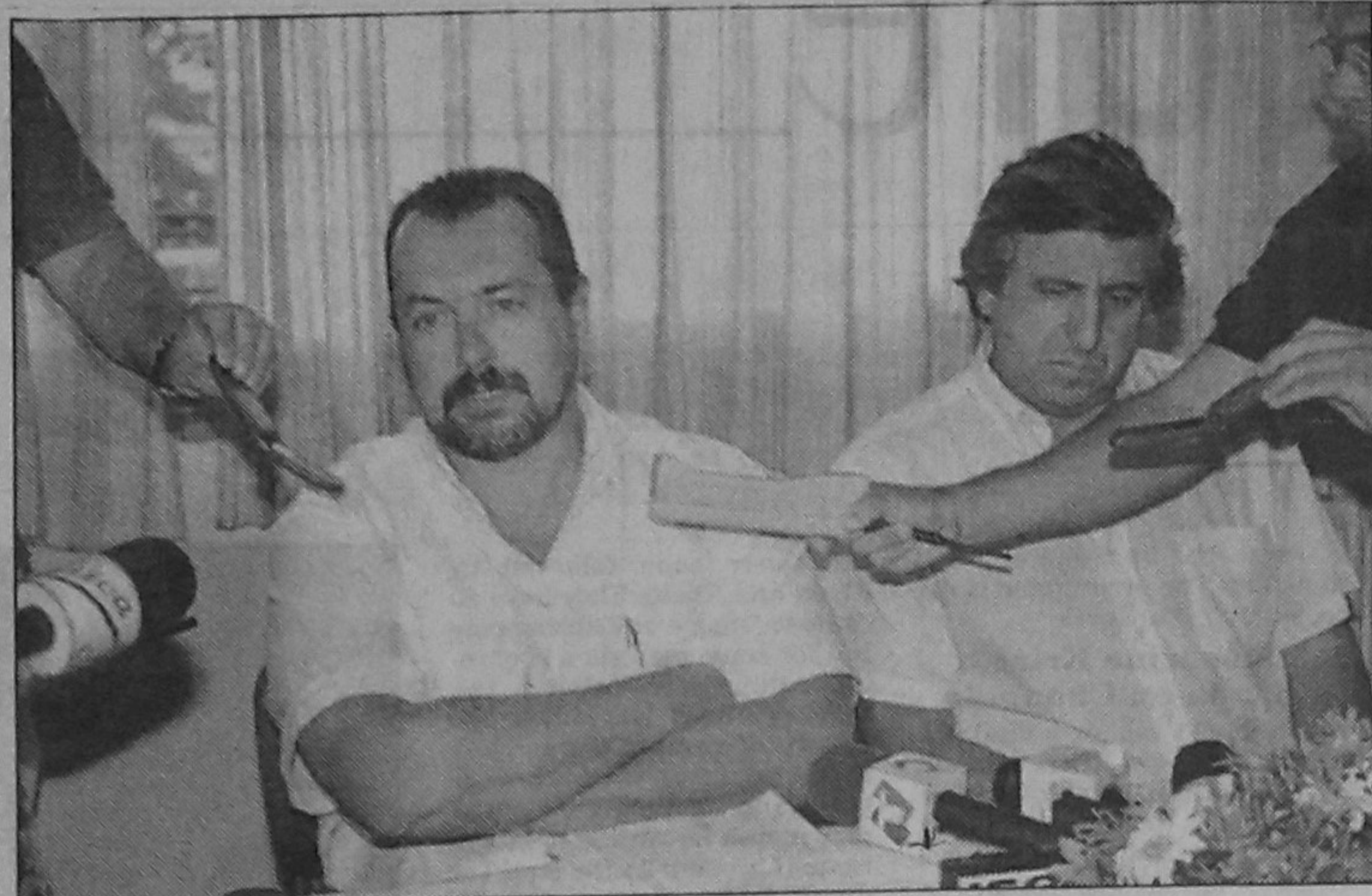
Friends Ideal scored 109 in 22.1 overs losing all after winning the toss.

In replay, Friends Circle were restricted to 107 for seven.

World Club Championship FIFA names Referees for first eight matches

RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 5 (AFP): World football's governing body FIFA on Tuesday named the referees for the first eight matches at the world club championship which starts on Wednesday.

At Sao Paulo's Morumbi Stadium Jan 5: Real Madrid v Al-Nassr; Oscar Ruiz Acosta (Col) Corinthians v Casablanca; Stefano Braschi (Ita) Jan 7: Real Madrid v Corinthians; William Mattus Vega (Crc) Raja Casablanca v Al-Nassr; Derek Rugg (Nzl) At Rio de Janeiro's Maracana stadium Jan 6: Manchester United v Necaxa; Horacio Elizondo (Arg) Vasco Da Gama v Sao Paulo; Dick Jol (Ned) Jan 8: Manchester United v Vasco Da Gama; Saad Mane (Kuw) South Melbourne v Necaxa; Fella Ndoye (Sen)



Doctor Frank Torres (L), of the Cantegril Hospital in Punta del Este, Uruguay, giving details about the condition of football superstar Diego Maradona, who was admitted in the intensive care unit following hypertension and ventricular Arrhythmia on January 4. — AFP photo

Maradona hospitalised

PUNTA DEL ESTE, Uruguay, Jan 5: Argentine football legend Diego Maradona was in intensive care in hospital here Wednesday after being admitted with heart problems, reports AFP.

Maradona was receiving treatment at the Cantegril Clinic after "suffering from a hypertension attack with ventricular arrhythmia, complicated by the fact he already had high blood pressure," said Dr Frank Torres.

Maradona's manager Guillermo Coppola denied reports that his condition had been brought on by drug addiction or an overdose.

"Everyone knows that Maradona has hypertension," Coppola, who was acquitted last year of cocaine possession, told the Radio Mitre radio station.

"It's already happened to him more than once -- in Chile during a television programme and then when playing football in Buenos Aires, but there were no indications that drugs had anything to do with it," he added.

"There was no ambulance, there was no coma, there were no police," he said, "blasting what he called sensational press reports of Maradona's ailment."

Torres said the 39-year-old Maradona was admitted to the clinic's intensive care unit on Tuesday afternoon.

Maradona, who all but singlehandedly won the 1986 World Cup for Argentina over Germany and then led them to the 1990 final where the Germans gained revenge, was accompanied to the hospital by his wife Claudia Villafane and Coppola with whom he had been on holiday.

When asked if the problems were brought about by a drug overdose, Torres refused to confirm or deny, answering only: "The hypertension problems could have many different causes."

Maradona has had repeated drug problems and has had rehabilitation several times. He was even thrown out of the 1994 World Cup for failing a drugs test and had a drugs ban while playing for Napoli in Italy.

He had been on holiday at the expensive holiday resort of Punta del Este where he spent the New Year.

Maradona, who courted controversy throughout a tempestuous career with Boca Juniors, before European stardom with Barcelona and Napoli, was recently voted Argentine sportsman of the 20th century.

He returned from football in 1997. Argentine President Fernando de la Rúa said he hoped Maradona would make a speedy recovery.

"He has given so much happiness to everyone," he said. "Among those to visit Maradona in the clinic were former president Carlos Menem and Uruguayan international Enzo Francescoli."

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Anna, Julie falter early

GOLD COAST, Australia, Jan 5: Russian glamour girl Anna Kournikova and top seed Julie Halard-Decugis of France crashed out of the Australian women's hardcourt championships here Wednesday, reports AFP.

The French top seed collapsed 6-0, 6-1 to in-form Bulgarian Magdalena Maleeva while the 18-year-old Kournikova was rolled in three sets by Croatia's top player, seventh-seeded Silvija Talaja.

Kournikova had an easy ride into the quarter-finals of this event -- a bye in the first round before second-round opponent, German qualifier Jana Kandarr retired injured after losing the first set.

But the thousands of fans who bought tickets to the sell-out final on Saturday will be bitterly disappointed, with the much-touted Russian playing only four sets in two appearances.

Kournikova took the first set 6-4, winning the last five games after being up 4-0.

She struggled to hold serve in the second set, which went to Talaja 6-4 in just over half an hour.

Hopman Cup Belgium keep hopes alive

PERTH, Jan 5: Belgium leaped back into contention for a place in the final of the eight-nation Hopman Cup tennis mixed teams event here Wednesday with a hard-fought 2-1 victory over the United States, reports AFP.

At the same time, Xavier Malisse and Dominique Van Roost ended the hopes of American pair, James Blake and Alexandra Stevenson, of appearing in Saturday's shootout for a first prize of 200,000 dollars (132,000 US).

Crushed 3-0 by South Africa in their opening match three days ago, Belgium rallied superbly as Malisse won his singles and then teamed up with Van Roost to triumph in the crucial mixed doubles.

Malisse beat Blake 7-6, 3-6, 6-3 in the singles after Van Roost had been overcome by Stevenson in her singles. Stevenson won 6-4, 1-6, 6-4.

The Belgians held their nerve in the doubles, winning 6-4, 3-6, 6-2.

In the women's singles, 19-year-old Stevenson made amends for a disappointing introduction to the tournament two days earlier when she was beaten in straight sets by Sweden's Asa Carlsson.

Stevenson, ranked 42nd, briefly lost her composure in the second set, but steadied in the third to clinch the honors from her higher-credentialed 26-year-old opponent (ranked 14th) with relative ease.

The American, a last-minute substitute for the injured Monica Seles, twice reached 180km/h with her serve -- by far the fastest of the tournament by a woman.

Belgium's hopes were revived when energetic 19-year-old Malisse ground down college student James Blake, 20, over a slogging three sets.

Malisse, ranked 143rd, scraped through the opening set by winning the tie-breaker, went down in the second as Blake (220th) fought back, but had enough in reserve to clinch the deciding third set.

Malisse and Blake are close friends off the court, but that friendship ends when they pick up their rackets.

"You could say we are friends, but we are also enemies," said Malisse. "He is a nice guy to be around, but I had to work hard for every point."

The Belgian was pleased that he had no further trouble from his knees, which proved a problem in his previous rubber three days ago against South Africa's Wayne Ferreira.

Top seeds survive scare

AUCKLAND, Jan 5: Top seed Elena Likhovtseva and fifth seed Anna Smashanova were forced into tough matches to stay alive in the women's ASB Bank Tennis Classic at Stanley street on Wednesday, reports AP.

Russian Likhovtseva, ranked 18th in the world, had to battle a strong challenge from 18-year-old Katrina Srebotnik of Slovenia 3-6, 6-0, 6-4.

Smashanova of Israel, ranked 47, was given a severe scare by 85th-ranked Ruano Pascual of Spain in a match that lasted 3 hours and 20 minutes. She won 5-7, 7-6 (7-2), 7-6 (7-3) to make her second Auckland quarterfinal after last making the final eight in 1994.

The two other seeds, second seed Anne Kremer of Luxembourg and sixth seed Cara Black of Zimbabwe won their way into the final eight with straight-sets wins.

Black beat Canadian Jana Nedelji 6-1, 7-6 (7-3) while Kremer eliminated Argentina Marina Diaz Oliva 7-6 (7-4), 6-1.

All three qualifiers, Nuria Llagostera of Spain, Jill Graybas of the United States and Vanessa Webb of Canada lost in the second round Wednesday.

Thursday's quarterfinals pit top seed Likhovtseva against Black, Switzerland's Miroslava Vavrinec against Netherlands' Amanda Hopmans, Smashanova against American Meghann Shaughnessy and Argentinian Paola Suarez against Kremer.

"I struggled with my serve, especially in the third set, but I did most of what my coach said and that was not to worry about my serve," Likhovtseva said after her win.

"My serve gets inconsistent but I've had to put that behind me, I've got to be more confident about my serve, maybe I need to practice it a bit more."



Russian Anna Kournikova makes a backhand return against Silvija Talaja of Croatia at the Australian women's Hardcourt championship yesterday. — AFP photo

Ex-German stars back in school

COLOGNE, Germany, Jan 5: Persistent rain and wintry gloom have greeted the creme de la creme of Germany's former football heroes as they return to school to learn the A B Cs of the game which made them great, reports AFP.

Seventeen big names have gone back to school to get their coaching licence in a special crash course organised by the German football federation (DFB) specially for "particularly worthy" internationals.

It is an elite club - open only to players who have won at least 40 caps and who have played at either a world or a European championship.

Among the list are Germany's goalscoring hero from the 1990 World Cup victory over Argentina Andreas Brehme and his teammates from that triumph Jurgen Klinsmann, Guido Buchwald, Stefan Reuter and Jurgen Kohler while European champion Mathias Sammer and Bernd Holzenbein from the 1974 World Cup winners are also taking up the offer.

There are also two representatives of Germany's world class women's football team, Doris Fitschen and Bettina Wiegmann.

Joachim Low, currently coach of Second Division club Karlsruhe, and Andreas Zuchner, coach of First Division Hansa Rostock, don't meet the strict requirements but have been allowed to take part as exceptions because they are already working as professional coaches after getting special

permission from the DFB. Bulgarian international Krassimir Balakov, who plays for Bundesliga club VfB Stuttgart, is also present thanks to a special co-operation agreement with his country's football federation.

The first part of the course is training at the Hennef Sports Academy near Cologne until Friday. It will be completed by two further sessions from May 22 to June 9 and a further three

to 240 hours for this elite crop of athletes.

It's a unique idea got off the ground last year by DFB official Gero Bisanz. He put it to former striker Jurgen Klinsmann, who moved to California with his American wife and children after retiring at the end of the 1998 World Cup, who then pushed the idea with his colleagues.

"I think it's a positive idea of the DFB to prepare players as coaches who have had a big influence on German football in the last 10 to 12 years," Klinsmann said.

"We have been thinking about this for a while. It keeps the players integrated in the game because many are making the switch to the media and from there it's easy to only criticise."

Klinsmann no longer plays at professional level but keeps himself fit by occasionally training with US side Los Angeles Galaxy and sometimes watches college soccer games.

Mathias Sammer, who hasn't played football since late 1997 and who is still undergoing daily physiotherapy to overcome a debilitating knee injury which seems to have ended his career, is only taking the theoretical course and skipping the practical.

The man to travel furthest is Pierre Littbarski, the former FC Cologne star, who flew in from Japan where he now lives.

A certain amount of envy has been generated among coaches and players excluded from this elite class of 2000 but DFB official Bisanz says he is heartened by the fact Germany is following the example set by another leading football nation.

"We took as our example a similar coaches course in the Netherlands which has also received UEFA's seal of approval," Bisanz said.

The dark and wet winter weather at Hennef's idyllic sports academy has made the first days of this pilot course less than enjoyable out on the pitch. At least in June, when round two comes along, some sunshine might be in place.

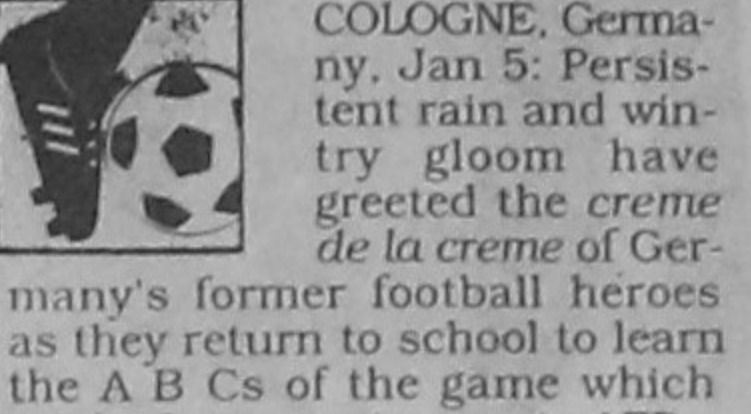
Norman, Martin advance

ADELAIDE, Jan 5: Third-seeded Magnus Norman of Sweden had some early problems Wednesday but rebounded for a 7-5, 6-4 win over Australian Richard Fromberg at the AAPT hardcourt tennis championships, reports AP.

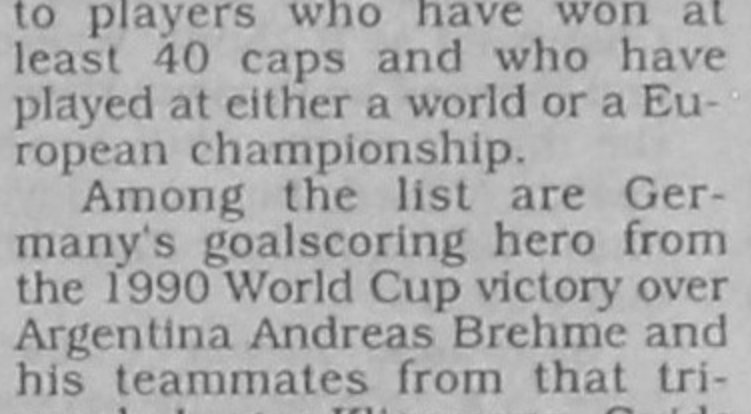
In another match, Albert Martin of Spain beat Australian James Sekulov 7-6, (7-2), 7-6 (7-5).

Fresh from a strong 1999 in which he rose to world No. 15, Norman broke Fromberg's serve in the opening game and took the first set in blustery conditions at Memorial Drive.

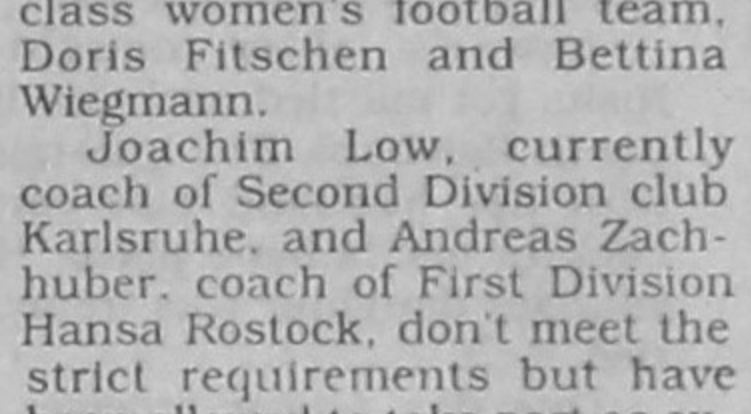
The serve at 2-3, but the Swede showed great fortitude to save the break points and win the game.



KLINSMANN days from June 13 to 16. Instruction will include lectures on tactics, sports medicine, motivation and leadership.



Normally participants in the DFB's training system need to attend 560 hours of practical and theoretical instruction to get their coaching licence but that has been more than halved



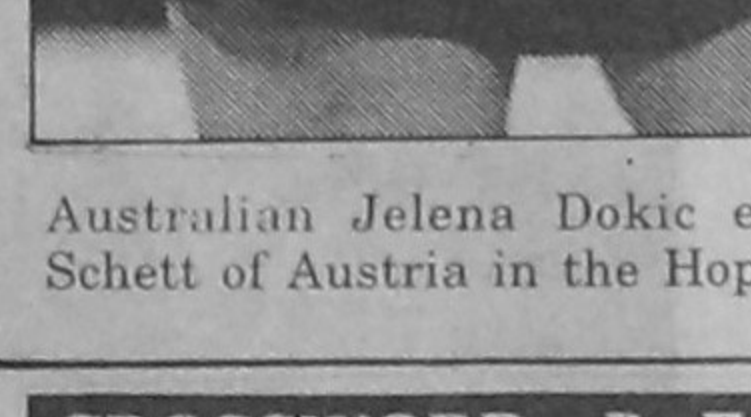
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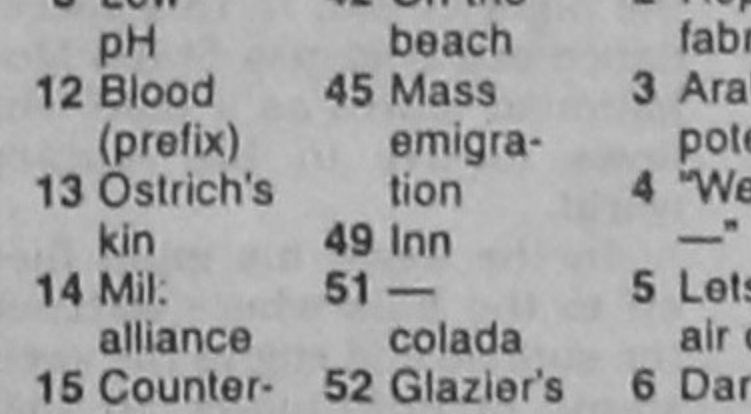
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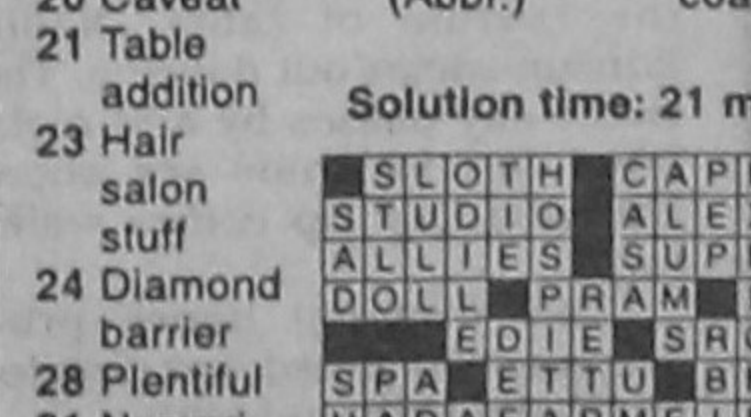
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Vasco warning for MU

RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 5: World Club Championship hosts Vasco da Gama warmed up for Saturday's showdown against European champions Manchester United by thrashing Algeria 7-0 in a friendly, reports AFP.

Vasco, who were without striker Edmundo but with new signing Romario, swaggered through the match in the manner of a training ground kickabout.

Romario got on the score-sheet seven minutes into the second half after Donizete had twice netted before the break while Juninho made it 3-0 on the stroke of half time.

Felipe, Dede and Viola completed the rout against wholly outclassed opponents who were gearing up for the African Nations finals in Nigeria and Ghana.

Vasco da Gama, named by United coach Sir Alex Ferguson as the English Premiership giants' major rivals for the trophy, kick off their campaign to lift the inaugural championship against Australia's South Melbourne on Thursday at Rio's refurbished Maracana stadium.

United kick off their Group B match Thursday against Mexican outfit Necaxa.

Group A favourites Real Madrid, who open the tournament Wednesday at Sao Paulo's Morumbi stadium, are meanwhile taking their first opponents Al-Nassr of Saudi Arabia seriously, though there should normally be a huge gulf in class between the two.

Fernando Hierro, skipper of the seven-times European champions, said he "doubts they will be asking us for our autographs" when the two sides take to the field.

Real, slated back home for a hugely disappointing league campaign, arrived Monday evening and are on a reported

60,000-dollar per head bonus for winning a tournament worth six million dollars to the winners.

The Spaniards earlier held their first training session in heavy rain in Sao Paulo.

The other sides in Real's mid-table Vampeta has a future with the club as he thrashes out a new deal given the widespread interest at home and abroad for his services.

The Brazilians expect to start at full strength against Casablanca though defender Joao Carlos reportedly has a minor leg strain.

Manchester United are embroiled in controversy as they bid for an unprecedented fifth trophy in seven months after chairman Martin Edwards reopened the row late Monday on his club's appearance in the tournament by saying the Red Devils would rather be back home playing in the FA Cup.

"If we had had the choice we would not have come to Brazil," said Edwards amid reports that the European champions are disappointed with the facilities on offer and with the arrangements for pre-match training at the Maracana stadium in Rio de Janeiro.

"We had to give up the FA Cup. About that we are disappointed," said Edwards.

United's decision to take part in the FIFA tournament and relinquish their hold on the FA Cup sparked a row in England but the club felt the British Government wanted them to play in Brazil, fearing England's bid to stage the 2006 World Cup would be wrecked if they did not take part.

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