

Sport

Milutinovic in talks with China

BEIJING, Jan 7: Globe-trotting Serb coach Bora Milutinovic held talks here on Friday with the Chinese Football Association (CFA) on whether he will take over the country's national team, officials said, reports AFP.

CFA officials contacted by telephone confirmed talks were held but refused to disclose their location or provide an update on their status. Domestic newspapers reported that Milutinovic, who has coached four different countries at the World Cup finals including the United States and most recently Nigeria in 1998 -- arrived in the capital late on Thursday on a flight from Los Angeles. They indicated that Friday's talks would produce a final decision on the Serb's candidacy, but a source close to the CFA downplayed the possibility.

The source told AFP arrangements had been made for Milutinovic to attend a four-nation friendly tournament in China which will be held in Guangzhou January 14-16 as an observer. This indicates that today is not D-day and that he is going to be around for the week, he said, adding the coach would not make such firm plans if there were an immediate chance of the contract talks falling through.

The source also specified that CFA Vice Director Zhang Jilong -- a key official involved in the hiring process -- was not available to participate in Friday's talks.

They wouldn't make any commercial decision without him, he added. China on December 10 sacked Briton Bobby Houghton, who headed the country's national and Olympic sides for 18 months, for failing to secure a berth in the Sydney 2000 Games.

Two of Houghton's Chinese assistants, Jin Zhiyang and Chi Shangbin, have been named as interim coaches for the Guangzhou tournament, which will also feature New Zealand, Jamaica and favourites Uruguay.

Sources indicated earlier this week Beijing's sports ministry had ordered a slow-down in the hiring process for a new coach and that a final decision was not due until February.

But earlier Friday, Shanghai's Wenhui Daily said: "This round of negotiations will formally decide whether or not (Milutinovic) will become the head coach of China's national team."

The colourful coach was quoted as brushing off reporter's inquiries on his arrival, saying all questions could be answered after Friday's talks.

But he added: "California's sun is warm, but Beijing's snow is just as beautiful."

Milutinovic last season coached New Jersey's MetroStars in the US professional league.

He had a first meeting with CFA officials on December 7 in Japan on the sidelines of World Cup qualifiers.

The Wenhui Daily said Chinese sports authorities were insisting a do-or-die clause on China's qualification for the 2002 World Cup finals be included in any contract.

Across China, poaching of Yugoslav football talent appeared to be in high gear, as Shanghai's premier-division club also announced signing the coach of Bulgarian league leaders Levski Sofia, Lubo Petrovic, and two Obilic Belgrade forwards.

Newspapers reported Shanghai Shenhua on Thursday signed Petrovic and one of his assistants from Sofia in hopes of regaining top-dog status in the country's First Division.

As part of the deal, the club also picked up two strikers from Yugoslav league's Obilic Belgrade, including captain Rankovic Zoran, 31, and Vukiczev Sasa, 26.

Gold at Sydney Tergat's target

PUNTA DEL ESTE, Uruguay, Jan 7: Kenyan running ace Paul Tergat said on Thursday he was gearing up for an Olympic medal at the Sydney Games in September as well as better his world marks in cross country and the half marathon, reports AFP.

Reflecting on last week's fourth win in five years in the Sao Paulo Corrida on New Year's Eve and Wednesday's third straight triumph in Uruguay's San Fernando Corrida 10 km road race Tergat said the year was boiling up nicely.

"I've just picked up my fourth title in the San Silvestre (New Year's Eve run in Sao Paulo), a really tough event and happily I was able to repeat the trick in Uruguay, getting my third win there in three attempts."

"That's a great boost to me and I think I can carry that good work into coming events." 30-year-old Tergat, the five-time world cross country champion told AFP.

But he said he could not rest on his laurels if he is to maintain his dominance over compatriot William Kiplagat, who pushed him to the line at San Fernando before losing by just one second.

"Kiplagat forced me to up my pace in the final metres otherwise the win would have slipped through my fingers," said Tergat, who added he felt as comfortable as a fish in the sea when road running or taking part in cross country events.

"My big targets for 2000 are based around winning an Olympic medal for my country at 10,000 metres and beating my own world record over 21 kilometres," explained Tergat, who set the 21km mark in timing 59min 17sec in Milan on April 4.

Primera Liga preview

Worrying times for Deportivo

MADRID, Jan 7: Faltering Spanish league leaders Deportivo La Coruna must fear a Barcelona ambush on Saturday as they look to get back on the rails following two straight defeats - but it won't come from title rivals Barca, who have welcomed Rivaldo back into the fold, reports AFP.

Instead, Deportivo, humbled 3-0 at home on Wednesday by Racing Santander, must get back on track with three points at Espanyol, the "other" team in the Catalan metropolis.

The Espanyol sit in the lower reaches of the table after Wednesday's 2-1 defeat at Athletic Bilbao and a trip to their Montjuic stadium should be rather less taxing than a visit to the Nou Camp.

But after a ten-match winning streak came to an end before Christmas at Zaragoza Deportivo, who have never won the championship, cannot afford another slip with Zaragoza five points behind and hosting Valencia on Sunday.

If Zaragoza's challenge were not bad enough, albeit tempered by a goalless draw at Malaga on Wednesday, Barcelona themselves are back up to third following a solid 3-1 win over Real Sociedad.

Rivaldo will, meanwhile, return to the Barca line-up for Sunday's trip to Celta Vigo, whom they have now leapfrogged into third spot as the midfielder has made up with coach Louis van Gaal.

European Footballer of the Year Rivaldo insists he wants a central role rather than stick to the left wing position where he has made his name and that insistence saw him dropped for two matches.

Such was the form of Portuguese star Figo on the left wing against Sociedad that the Brazilian was hardly missed - a sign that Barcelona are moving inexorably towards the summit as they chase a third straight league title.

But Rivaldo has agreed to go back to the left flank for the good of the club and is on record as saying he wants to stay with the Catalan club until at least 2003.

The situation has changed I spoke with Van Gaal and the whole squad and abandoned my idea (to play through the middle). But this does not stop me thinking I can play better in the middle of the park," Rivaldo said.

However, he told Marca magazine he had realised the wellbeing of the team was the

most important factor. "I want to be with the team and the fans and I don't want the situation to go on any longer. I want to win the championship with Barcelona," Rivaldo insisted.

"The boss has confidence in me and everything will be as before - besides Van Gaal knows my preferences," said the Brazilian, adding he had had no offers to switch club.

"There is no reason to force my departure from such a great club. I have never wanted to leave and my family is very happy in Barcelona," said Rivaldo.

Vigo, who could only draw 1-1 with Valencia on Tuesday night, lie six points behind Galacian neighbours La Coruna and their early challenge is starting to slip.

Real Madrid, ensconced in midtable, were to have travelled

to Valladolid, but their involvement in the World Club Championship means that match is postponed, putting back what might have been a debut for Japanese international Shoji Jo, who was poised on Thursday to sign from Yokohama Marinos.

Jo would be the first Japanese player to play in Spain.

Other weekend action sees struggling Atletico Madrid host Real Mallorca, who have recovered from a dismal start to the campaign to lie sixth just four points behind Barcelona.

Santander, buoyed by their superb result in La Coruna which ended a run of nine matches without a win, host a Malaga side struggling gamely to stay outside the bottom five.

Other matches see Real Sociedad play Oviedo and Alaves host Athletic Bilbao as eighth meets seventh.



An AFP file photo of Yugoslav-born Bora Milutinovic.

Piolene breaks Indian hearts

MADRAS, Jan 7: Frenchman Cedric Piolene stormed into the quarterfinals at the 430,000-dollar Gold Flake Open in southern India Thursday by scoring an emphatic win over local favourite Leander Paes, reports AFP.

The second seeded Piolene played an authoritative game to outclass Paes 6-3, 6-4, cashing in on the Indian's mistakes midway through the match.

Paes had a mediocre start and Piolene was aggressive with his backhand returns. Though Paes played a few good rallies, it was not enough to pose any challenge to the former Wimbledon finalist.

Paes' first serve percentage was much higher at 66 percent as against 53 for Piolene but his returns flopped as he tried to defend on his backhand.

Piolene, the lone seeded player in the fray, will now play Davide Sanguinetti of Italy, who upset eighth seed Andreas Vinciguerra of Sweden 2-6, 7-5, 6-3.

Briton Jamie Delgado, meanwhile, came from behind to beat Orlin Stanoychev of Bulgaria 4-6, 6-2, 6-3 while Jerome Golmard of France beat Fredrick Jonsson of Sweden 6-2, 6-3, to complete the quarter-final line-up.

Talaja, Martinez to battle it out

GOLD COAST, Australia, Jan 7: Silvija Talaja will play for her first WTA Tour singles title Saturday against former Wimbledon champion Conchita Martinez in the final of the Australian women's hardcourt tennis championship here, reports AFP.

Talaja upset Spanish fourth-seed Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario 6-1, 3-6, 6-0 in Friday's semifinal to clinch her place in the final.

In the other semifinal, Martinez cruised past France's Nathalie Dechy, 6-3, 6-1.

While the world No.29 Talaja has never won a WTA tournament she made three finals and four semifinals last year.

"I don't think I'm going to be nervous tomorrow, I had a great week and I have nothing to lose," she said.

Fresh from a day of rest, Talaja won the first five games of the opening set against the Spaniard, who survived a three-set thriller with defending champion Patty Schnyder on Thursday to reach the semis.

"The way I'm playing at the moment, I can say I think I have a good chance," Talaja said.

"I had some big wins, so you can expect a lot from me tomorrow."

Black, Kremer in final

AUCKLAND, Jan 7: Zimbabwe's Cara Black defeated Amanda Hopmans of the Netherlands in the ASB Bank Tennis Classic semifinal Friday to set up a final against second-seeded Anne Kremer, who beat American Meghann Shaughnessy 6-3, 6-3 in the other semifinal, reports AP.

Black, 20, who ousted top seed Elena Likhovtseva in the quarterfinals, had a shaky start before producing another powerful performance to advance to Saturday's decider against the 24-year-old from Luxembourg.

Sixth-seeded Black surrendered an early break of serve to Hopmans and trailed 3-0 before she fought back to win nine successive games to grab control of the first set and the match.

"I was a bit nervous going out there," said Black, who has only one win in two previous semifinals on the WTA tour.

"At 0-3, I thought 'oh c'mon'. I then forced the game at bit and she lost her rhythm."

Black took a 3-0 lead in the second set but Hopmans rallied to reduce the margin to 4-3 before the Zimbabwean again took control.

Black later combined with Alexander Fusai of France to defeat Slovenian pair Katrina Srebotnik and Tina Krizan 6-4, 7-6 (7-4) in the doubles semifinal.

In the doubles final, Black and Fusai will meet Austrian pair Barbara Schwartz and Patricia Wurche, who defeated Paola Suarez of Argentina and Virginia Ruana Pascal of Spain 6-3, 6-2.

Black said she was excited about reaching the finals, adding: "I've got the chances I want and hopefully now I can go all the way."

Kremer played a steady game to oust Shaughnessy in Friday's other semi.



World number one Martina Hingis of Switzerland in action against Russian Lina Krasonrouskaya at the Millennium Cup in Hong Kong yesterday. Hingis prevailed 6-2, 6-2 to meet Jennifer Capriati in today's final. —AFP photo

Thais surprise 'em all

PERTH, Jan 7: Thailand's tennis minnows play South Africa for the Hopman Cup Saturday after a giant-killing run to the final of the 900,000 Australian dollars (590,000 US) mixed teams tournament, reports AFP.

The Thai pair Paradorn Sriachaphan and Tamarine Tanasugarn have upset fancied teams including hosts Australia and Slovakia in their fairytale charge to the final and a tilt at the 200,000 Australian dollar (131,000 US) first prize.

"It is incredible to be in the final," Tamarine said.

"Everyone in Thailand has given us wonderful support and we thank them." Her partner Paradorn added: "The South Africans are playing well -- they are very good."

Their play has earned them hero status in Thailand and message of congratulations on Friday from Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai.

Chuan said in a faxed message that the pair had brought fame to Thailand and were a good example to young people.

"On behalf of the Thai government and Thai people, I admire and welcome the fact that both Tamarine and Paradorn have won through," Chuan wrote.

The South African team of Amanda Coetzer and Wayne Ferreira is steeped in big time tennis experience and will go into the final as favourites.

Sizing up her opposite number, Tamarine said, "Amanda is a very consistent player with a lot of experience. It will not be easy for us, but we have nothing to lose again. You never know what may happen."

One worry for the Thais is Paradorn's troublesome elbow which was sore during Friday's matches.

"It is perhaps because I have played so much in the past week," he said.

It will be the first time either of the Thais have met their South African opponents.

Ferreira, 28, is ranked 53rd in the world, while 20-year-old Paradorn is 106. Coetzer, 28, is ranked 11th in the women's list, while Tanasugarn, 22, is 72nd.

Thailand qualified for the final, despite being beaten 2-1 by Austria in Friday's last set of preliminary ties.

Thailand were assured of their place in the last two as soon as Tamarine beat world number eight Barbara Schett 6-7, 6-3, 6-3 in the women's singles.

At that stage Thailand had won enough ties and matches to be in an unbeatable position in their group.

The following losses by Paradorn in the men's singles and by the pair in the mixed doubles were inconsequential.

Paradorn lost 3-6, 1-6 to Stefan Koubek, while the Thais went down 7-8 to Schett and Koubek in a pro-set.

Thailand qualified for the eight-nation contest only after beating Japan in a play-off last Saturday.

They should be encouraged by the success of Slovakia two years ago which, after sneaking into the contest in a play-off, beat France in the final.

Tamarine showed typical tenacity in fighting back for her victory after the experienced Schett had won the first set.

Australia's hopes of reaching the final ended when 16-year-old whizzkid Helena Doki was beaten by Japan's Ai Sugiyama, 4-6, 3-6 in the women's singles.

Australia's woes were compounded when Mark Philippoussis withdrew with a sore left shin, meaning Japan took the men's singles and mixed doubles on forfeit and won the tie 3-0.

Philippoussis said in a tie against Thailand three days ago he hurt his left Achilles tendon.

"I compensated for this by using the shin muscles, which are now sore," he said. "I don't want to push it and risk shin splints, with a busy schedule coming up."

Escude, seeded eighth and with a year-end ranking of 37, hammered world No.5 Henman, who was forced to battle from the baseline.

Escude said he looked forward to playing an Australian after the French Davis Cup defeat.

"I would like revenge," he said of his semifinal with Hewitt.

Rafter set to return

ADELAIDE, Jan 7: Pat Rafter is set to make a comeback to tournament competition at the Adidas International starting Sunday in Sydney, where he plans to partner Wayne Arthurs in the doubles, reports AP.

The former World No. 1 has been out of action since pulling out of the US Open last August with a shoulder injury.

The two-time US Open champion is not expected to make a comeback to singles action until April -- in a bid to continue extensive rehabilitation of his right shoulder following surgery last October.

"I'll definitely play doubles in Sydney and, if everything goes well, Wayne and I will play doubles at the Australian Open as well," Rafter was quoted saying in Friday's Sydney Daily Telegraph.

"I feel pretty confident, I feel like I'm hitting the ball well," the Swede said.

"It's a very tough match coming up here (against Norman). It's always tough to play a friend."

Enqvist, Norman in semis

ADELAIDE, Jan 7: Top seed Thomas Enqvist will take on Swedish compatriot Magnus Norman in a semifinal at the Australian men's hardcourt tennis championship here Saturday, reports AFP.

Enqvist took another step in his title defence by ousting Frenchman Sebastien Grosjean 7-6, 7-5 Friday, while Norman overcame Spaniard Alberto Martin 6-4, 6-3 and Australian teenager Lleyton Hewitt beat compatriot Jason Stoltenberg 6-2, 6-2 in the night match.

Hewitt, unusually restrained, was helped along by a multitude of Stoltenberg errors -- including two double faults on break point -- but easily outclassed his older opponent with strong serving and precision shots in a near-flawless performance.

Hewitt will now meet Frenchman Nicolas Escude in Saturday's semifinal.

Enqvist and Norman will meet for the fourth time Saturday -- and it is all because Enqvist persuaded his practice partner to play the first week of the year in Adelaide.

Second-seeded Briton Tim Henman will leave for Melbourne Saturday to prepare for the Australian Open after he was beaten by Escude 6-3, 6-1.

Norman admits he wanted to celebrate New Year's Eve in Sweden, but said Enqvist convinced him to travel.

"I have Thomas to thank for that... I thought it was a good idea because last year I didn't play the first week," Norman said. "I have never beaten him, though."

They have met three times in the past three years, but Norman is yet to take a set off the current world No.4.

Ranked 15, third seed Norman said he still had room to improve after getting off to a slow start and allowing Martin to jump to a 3-1 lead.

But he broke back twice to claim the first set, then was slightly rattled at 2-0 up in the second when he was called for a foot fault on his second serve.

Enqvist emerged from his victory with an iced-up right shoulder and elbow, saying he was sore but not injured after his clash with seventh seeded Grosjean.

The French Davis Cup team member had his chances -- he broke the top seed's serve and was serving at 6-5 up in the first set but Enqvist broke to force the tiebreak.

Grosjean then squandered a 5-2 lead in the second set, Enqvist winning five straight games.

"I feel pretty confident, I feel like I'm hitting the ball well," the Swede said.

"It's a very tough match coming up here (against Norman). It's always tough to play a friend."

FA Cup preview

Div One leaders relishing it

LONDON, Jan 7: Manchester City striker Paul Dickov believes his side's fourth round FA Cup match home to English Premiership leaders Leeds United on Sunday gives the high fliers of Division One the chance to relax and play good football, reports AFP.

The match against Leeds will be a massive game. It is one that we can look forward to and one in which we are going to be the underdogs for a change," said Dickov, who played in the top flight with Arsenal.

"This is a game we will not be expected to win - so we might as well relax and enjoy it as we have nothing to lose."

"Our main priority is, of course, the league, but next Sunday will be good."

City are hoping the flu bug which has disrupted their promotion campaign will clear up in time.

Captain Richard Edgill missed the 1-1 draw at Crewe after he was struck down by the virus and Tony Grant and former Leeds defender Danny Granville are also victims.

Granville was initially ruled out of the side 24 hours before the game at Gresty Road but volunteered to play - although he was forced to come off early in the second half.

Grant was also forced to leave the field later on after starting to feel the effects of flu and City will be hoping a couple of days' rest puts him in contention for a place against Leeds.

The recent signing from Everton is eligible to play after being an unused substitute for his former club in the last round at Exeter.

Joe Royle's side will be relishing the prospect of facing the Premiership leaders with David O'Leary's side licking their wounds after two successive league defeats.

Leeds' title hopes were seriously dented during the holiday period after going down 2-0 at Arsenal before losing 2-1 at home to Aston Villa while City's confidence will be high after taking a two-point lead at the top of their league, picking up seven points from a possible nine.

A full house is expected at Maine Road and City's vociferous support is likely to play a large part in lifting City into giving the kind of performance which made the team such a force in the early 1970's.

City's success this season has been based on a solid defence and with just 21 goals conceded in 26 games, the blue side of Manchester are showing the right credentials to earn promotion back to the top flight.

Premiership. A few weeks ago the prospect of facing Sunderland may well have been a fixture to make Tranmere fans quake with trepidation.

Sunderland's 4-1 demolition of Chelsea was one of the performances of the season, with a place in Europe beckoning.

But they have faltered since then, garnering just one point from their last three matches.

Monday's 1-0 defeat away to Wimbledon, followed a 5-0 thrashing by Everton and Manchester United coming from behind to grab a draw after Sunderland took a 2-0 lead - plus the fact that Rovers have already upset Premiership opposition in cup competitions this season - makes the result far less easy to predict.

John Aldridge's side are already through to the semi-finals of the League Cup after beating Middlesbrough in the last round and were 1-0 winners against West Ham in the third round of the FA Cup.

Sunderland, meanwhile, will be without striker Niall Quinn, who has been troubled by a nagging ankle injury.

The Republic of Ireland international will be rested for the encounter now that top-scorer Kevin Phillips has shaken off his hamstring injury.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger refuses to abandon hope of losing Nigerian international Nwankwo Kanu from Sunday's fourth round tie at home to Leicester.

Nigerian coach Amodu Shaibu has threatened to invoke FIFA sanctions to get Arsene Wenger's side kicked out of

the competition if Kanu isn't released on time to join his teammates to prepare for the African Nations Cup.

An Arsenal spokesman said: "We are pursuing the possibility of Kanu playing in Sunday's FA Cup clash with Leicester and are currently trying to resolve the matter with the relevant parties."

Nigerian coach Shaibu hit out at Wenger's delaying tactics but the parties are still involved in a series of talks about when the player will leave Highbury.

Shaibu has threatened to invoke FIFA's 14-day rule which governs clubs releasing players for major tournaments.

Shaibu said: "If Arsenal play Kanu in the FA Cup we will invoke FIFA sanctions against them. If it was a league game they would lose the points, so if it's a cup tie they must lose the tie."

Weekend's FA Cup matches (kickoff at 1500 GMT unless stated):

Saturday: 3rd rd replays Gillingham v Walsall, Oxford United v Nottingham Forest

4th rd Aston Villa v Southampton, Charlton v QPR, Coventry v Burnley, Everton v Birmingham, Fulham v Wimbledon, Grimsby v Bolton, Newcastle United v Sheffield United, Plymouth v Preston, Sheffield Wednesday v Wolves, Tranmere v Sunderland, Wrexham v Cambridge United

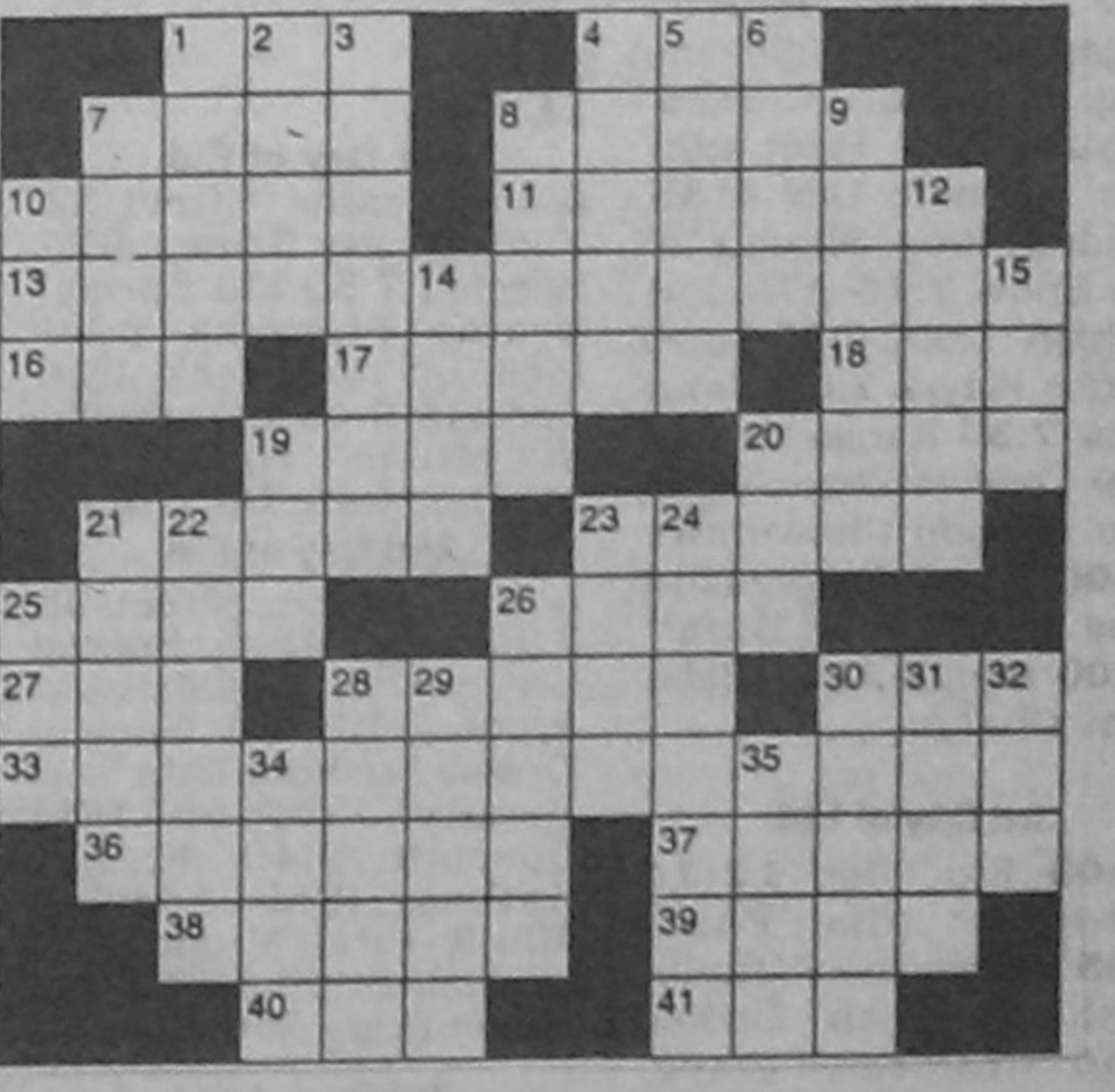
Sunday: Arsenal v Leicester City (k/o 1600), Manchester City v Leeds United (k/o 1400) Monday: Liverpool v Blackburn (k/o 1945)



Spaniard Conchita Martinez plays forehand against Nathalie Dechy of France at the Australian women's hardcourt championship at Gold Coast yesterday. —AFP photo

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

- ACROSS
- 1 Navigation route to Casablanca
- 4 East Coast wicker work
- 7 Emanation of keepers
- 8 Olympian's partner
- 10 Ball partner
- 11 Antilles, Bahamas, etc.
- 13 Jockey's goal
- 16 Do brick-work
- 17 Wash DOWN
- 18 Actor Robbins
- 19 Sensational
- 20 Mid-May honoree
- 21 Mistreatment
- 23 Station Island transport
- 25 Entreat
- 26 Coffee shop setup
- 2 Port on route to Casablanca
- 3 Lattice-work pavilions
- 4 "Mrs. Brown" actress
- 5 Ex of Liz, Debbie, and Connie
- 6 Hideout
- 7 Met melody
- 8 Errol Garner hit
- 9 College instructor
- 1 Laugh-provoking maybe
- 10 Piercing tool
- 12 Thin and glutinous
- 14 Exceptional
- 15 Type squares
- 19 Chap
- 20 "Robinson"
- 21 Tree-lined recess
- 22 Hound variety
- 23 Uncommon bird
- 24 Localized
- 25 Chum
- 26 Single
- 28 Felony
- 29 Favorable quality
- 30 Monica's topper
- 31 Doggie bag fill
- 32 Blond shade
- 34 Malevolence
- 35 Abnormal appetite



CRYPTOQUIP C SAHO DSHD FNID AQRAL QCRXCJX CJ KCDCAI KHQQ

DSAFIAQRAI FADON-XJNFAL. Yesterday's Cryptoquip: THE WITTY FIREMAN REFERRED TO HIS WIFE OF MANY YEARS AS HIS OLD FLAME.

Today's Cryptoquip clue: J equals N

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.