

Nakata may be relieved from national duty

TOKYO, Jan 27: Japan star Hidetoshi Nakata is likely to be left out of his country's squad next month in order to allow him to concentrate on his battle for a place at Serie A giants AS Roma.

Nakata has been an ever-present in the Japan midfield for the past four years and would normally be expected to have played in a quadrangular tournament in Hong Kong next month and Asian Cup qualifiers in Macau soon afterwards.

But the two-time Asian Player of the Year is still battling to tie down a place in the starting line-up at Roma after moving to the club from Perugia earlier this month.

Now the Japan Football Association has indicated the body will let Nakata focus on his fight to establish himself at his new club.

"Nakata's performance in Serie A will affect the future of Japanese football. It is not a good time to summon him, a Japan Football Association official was quoted by local papers as saying.

Nakata reportedly told officials he would skip the two events, but association officials in Tokyo declined to confirm it, adding: "All we can say is that we will announce the members this Saturday."

Japan's head coach Philippe Troussier now in training camp in Fukushima north of Tokyo, visited Italy earlier this month to see Nakata and is understood to have agreed his participation in the Hong Kong tournament.

Nakata's agent has said he would decide on it after playing two games for Roma.

Nakata proved a huge success after arriving in Italy in 1998, appearing in all but one of Perugia's 34 league games last season and scoring 10 goals.

He played for 67 minutes in his Roma debut against Verona, hitting a couple of shots on goal and earning plaudits from players and fans.

But he had a humiliating 23rd birthday last Saturday, being replaced at halftime and spending much of the time isolated.

Nakata played 90 minutes for the first time in the Italian Cup semi-finals Tuesday, only to see a shock 1-0 defeat to Serie A strugglers Cagliari.

Senegal coach confident of beating Egypt

KANO, Nigeria, Jan 27: Senegal will beat holders Egypt when the two sides meet in a key group C Nations Cup encounter here Friday, the Senegalese coach Peter Schnitger said Wednesday.

The group C favourites will "not know what hit them" when they play Senegal, Schnitger predicted.

"We are going to adopt a pattern that the Egyptians will not know what hit them. I know it will not come easy, but Egypt will fall," he said.

Schnitger declined to predict the scoreline in Friday's game but boasted: "I assure you that we shall not lose any match in this group."

Senegal's strategy so far is to score an early goal to demoralise the opposition, he said, adding this had happened in the 3-1 drubbing given to Burkina Faso Wednesday.

Currently Senegal leads group C, ahead of Egypt on goal difference.

Marion plans to cut back

RALEIGH, North Carolina, Jan 27: Women's sprint star Marion Jones said Wednesday her build-up season to a five-gold medal campaign at Sydney's Olympics would be a limited, reports Reuters.

"The meets this year will be greatly reduced from the past couple of years," Jones said during a teleconference to announce her sponsorship agreement with General Motors.

"I want to spend more time at home this year, focusing on training and not having to deal with the pressures of travelling and everything else that comes generally with competing in Europe," the two-time 100-metre world champion said from her residence in nearby Apex.

Jones said she was 100 per cent recovered from back spasms that forced her out of the 200 metres at last summer's World Championships and said she still planned to seek Olympic gold medals in five events: the 100- and 200-metre sprints, the long jump and the 4x100- and 4x400-metre relays.



Former world number one Steffi Graf applauds during her boyfriend Andre Agassi's semifinal victory over fellow American Pete Sampras at the Australian Open yesterday. — AFP photo

Andre gets the better of Pete

MELBOURNE, Jan 27: World number one Andre Agassi outslugged great US rival Pete Sampras 6-4, 3-6, 6-7, 7-6, 6-1 in a riveting Australian Open semifinal today, reports Reuters.

On a windy night on the newly-renamed Rod Laver Arena, Agassi became the first player since Laver in 1969 to reach the final of four successive Grand Slam tournaments.

He will play either defending champion Yevgeny Kafelnikov of Russia or 12th seed Magnus Norman of Sweden in Sunday's final.

But the clash between the heavyweights of men's tennis had been anticipated since the draw two weeks ago and it quickly lived up to its billing as the match of the tournament.

French and US Open champion Agassi and Wimbledon champion Sampras produced tennis of the highest quality throughout an enthralling clash which lasted two hours and 47 minutes.

"I'm certainly proud of the way I played," said Agassi, who won the Australian title in 1995. "I can't wait till Sunday."

Agassi matched Sampras's booming serves — the world number three fired down 37 aces during the match — with bullet-like returns on both sides of the court.

Sampras, who was bidding to improve the record of 12 Grand Slam titles he shares with Roy Emerson, appeared to have the match in his grasp in the fourth set before Agassi moved his game up another level, hitting the ball early and hard down both wings.

"It was definitely up there, it was definitely a big match," Sampras said.

Sampras appeared upset by a number of line calls late in the

fourth set and lost his service in the second game of the final set when Agassi crunched a winning forehand service return.

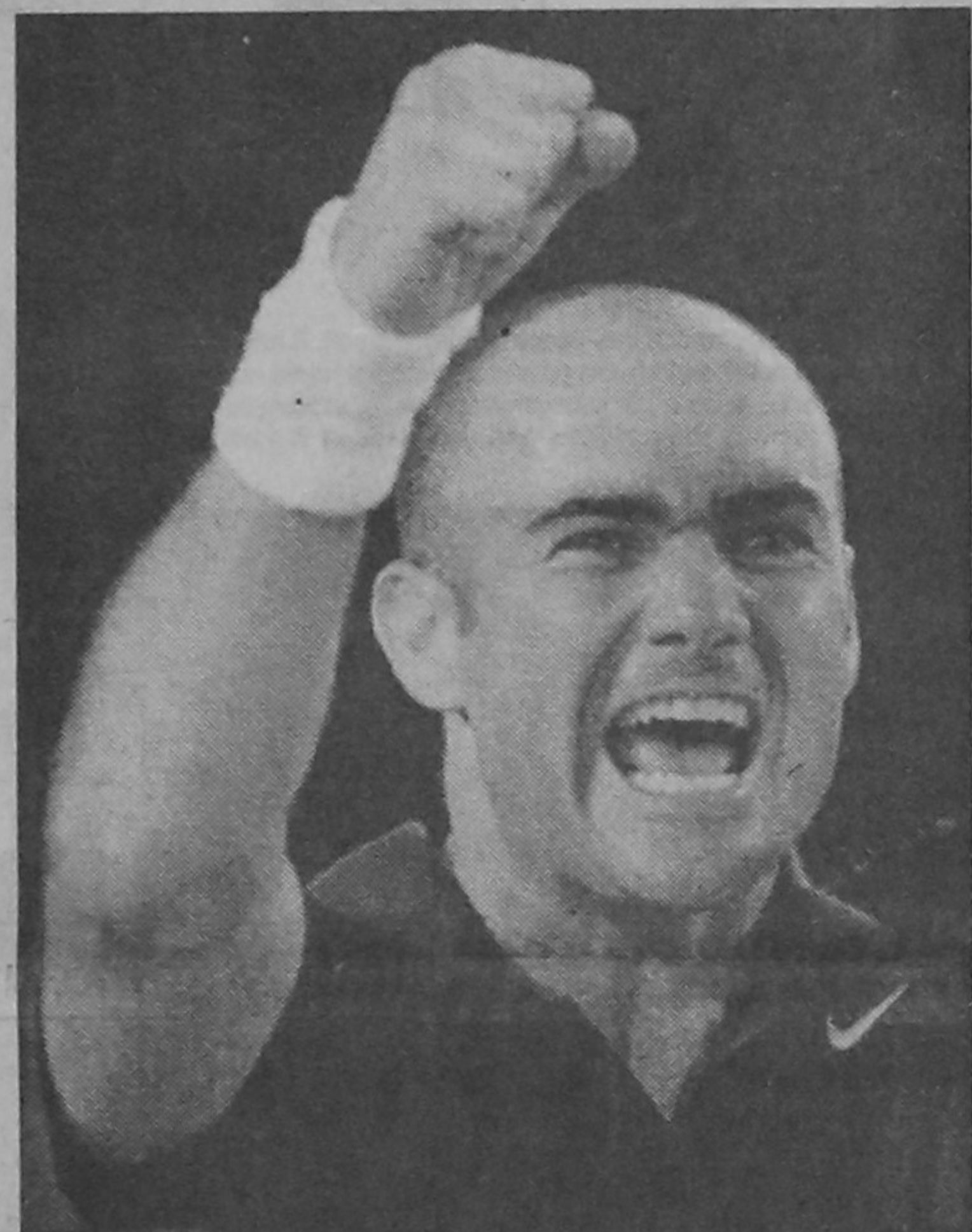
Agassi safely held his serve in the next game to open up a crucial 3-0 lead.

"With Pete you're only going to get a few chances," said

Agassi, who now trails Sampras 12-17 in career matches.

"It all worked out well in the fifth. I played well at the right time," he said.

Agassi lost their only previous five-set clash in the quarter-finals of Wimbledon in 1993.



Andre Agassi of the United States jubilates after beating his compatriot Pete Sampras in the semifinal of the Australian Open yesterday. — AFP photo

Diego rationalises punch!

BUENOS AIRES, Jan 27: Argentine football legend Diego Maradona, undergoing rehabilitation for cocaine addiction in Cuba, admitted Wednesday punching and breaking a photographer's car window with the "Hand of Reason," reports AFP.

Speaking on Argentinian radio, the 39-year-old World Cup winner said he hit out because he was angered by the constant intrusion and the lack of respect being shown to him.

Maradona caused a storm in England in 1986 when he admitted using a hand in scoring Argentina's first goal on the way to beating England in the World Cup quarter-final.

"If in 1986 I said the goal against the English came from the 'Hand of God', today I announce this broken glass comes from the force of reason," Maradona said.

International press photographer Heriberto Rodriguez sustained a slight injury to his eye

from broken glass, when Maradona struck the vehicle's window with his hand, shattering the glass.

The photographer and cameraman had been trailing the former world star as he walked with his wife Claudia and two daughters in Havana.

"If they don't respect me, I won't respect them," Maradona, who has dyed his hair a light shade of orange, told Radio 10.

Rodriguez said that he was shocked by the violence with which the former world star reacted.

However, Maradona defended his actions: "We were out walking as a family and they followed us. Whatever we do there is always a pack of photographers."

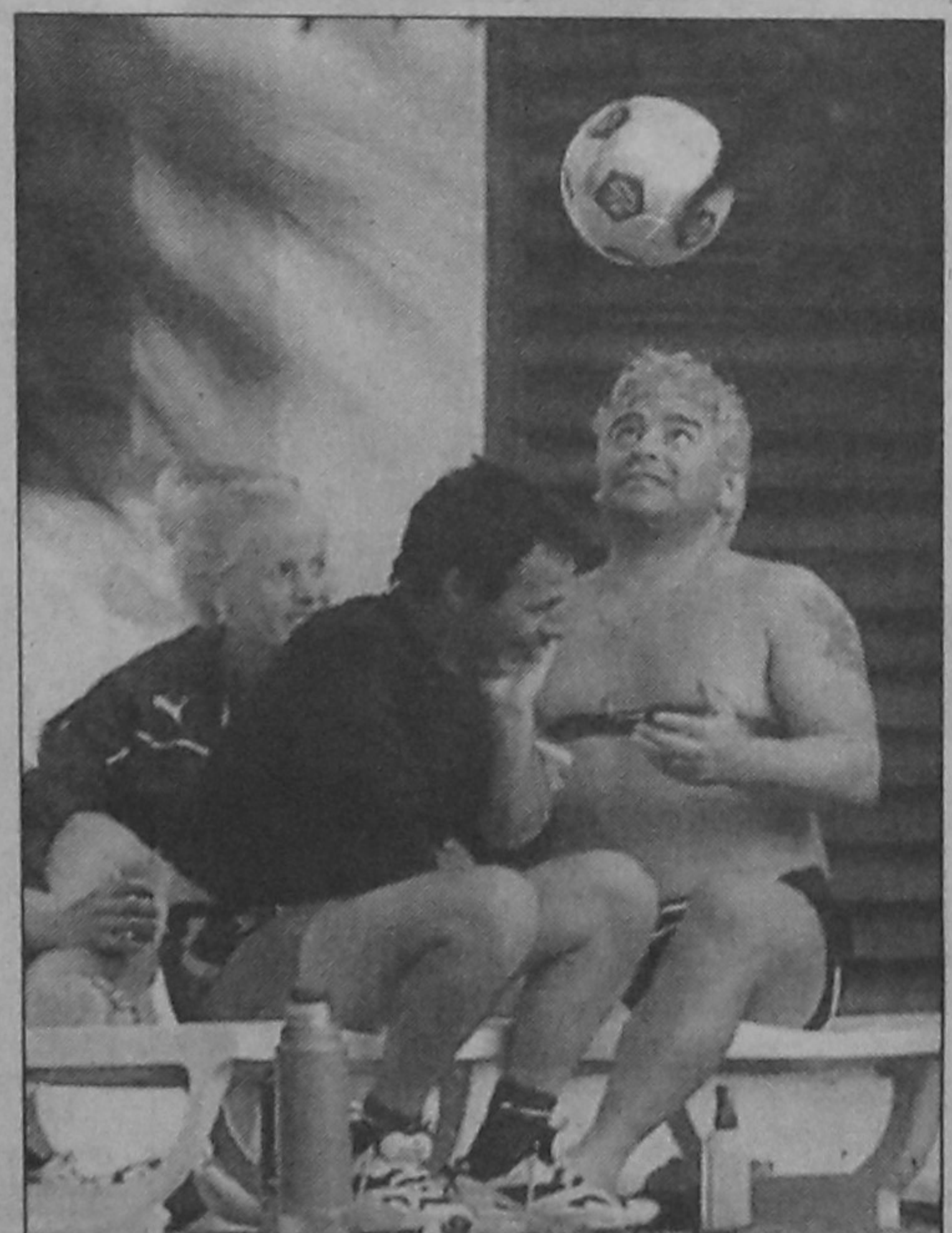
I asked them to stop but one of them said it was his job, so I threw my fist, but against the window.

"I didn't want to hit him. If I had I would have hit him directly," he added.

Maradona, arrived in Cuba on January 18 to undergo treatment for drug addiction, and is accompanied by a large group including friends, family and trainers.

President Fidel Castro visited him in the La Pradera clinic on Saturday and he is expected to continue his recuperation in the western Cuban town of Holguin.

Maradona was first admitted to a Uruguayan clinic after a cocaine overdose three weeks ago.



Argentine football superstar Diego Maradona plays with a ball at the gardens of the Las Praderas Hotel in Havana on January 26, at left is his wife Claudia Villafane. — AFP photo

AUSSIE OPEN AT A GLANCE

MELBOURNE, Jan 27: Highlights of the day session Thursday on the eleventh day of the US 8 million dollars (12.4 million Australian dollars) Australian Open tennis championships at Melbourne Park:

Weather: Rain earlier clearing to a fine. Maximum temperature of 75 f (24 Celsius). Attendance: 16,115

Results: Women's singles, No 1 Martina Hingis and Lindsay Davenport have not dropped a set on their way to meeting each other in Saturday's singles final.

Quote of the day: "I think it's great what she has done. I'm sure if I was in the stands I would obviously want her to win as well" — Lindsay Davenport on the crowd support for Jennifer Capriati during their semifinal clash.

Don Budge (1915-2000)

SCRANTON, Pennsylvania, Jan 27: Don Budge, who swept all four major tennis tournaments in 1938 to become the sport's first "Grand Slam" winner, died of cardiac arrest. He was 84, reports AP.

He died Wednesday at Mercy Hospital in Scranton, Pennsylvania, hospital spokeswoman Mary Leone said.

Budge was injured in a car accident in northeastern Pennsylvania on December 14 when he lost control and drove off the road. He was hospitalised in Poughkeepsie, New York, until January 8, when he was transferred to a nursing facility near his home in Dingmans Ferry.

Budge was taken to Mercy Hospital on January 17.

Budge had a complete game built around a whiplash backhand, which still is considered the best ever. He backed up a strong serve with power and accuracy off the ground and volleyed effectively.

Budge played in the shadow of a developing World War II and had a comparatively brief career. He found himself sandwiched between Bill Tilden's heyday in the 1920s and the emergence of a breed of tough, young professionals who hit the ball at 120 mph and competed for purses that soared into millions of dollars.

"I respected him a lot for his achievements," Pete Sampras said from the Australian Open. "I only met him a couple of times, but he was a very nice and friendly person."

Budge was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1964, and selected one of Tennis Magazine's 20 greatest players of the 20th century.

Jolly Jennifer!

MELBOURNE, Jan 27: A reflective Jennifer Capriati said she finally felt that she was back in the top flight of women's tennis despite her 6-2, 7-6 loss to Lindsay Davenport in the Australian Open semifinals today, reports Reuters.

The former teenage prodigy was naturally disappointed at her failed bid to reach her first Grand Slam final but said she found consolation in the way she had performed over the tournament.

"It doesn't mean that I'm still on the comeback trail," she said of her defeat. "I feel like I am back."

"I'm happy but I want more. I just know there's still a lot more work to be done, and that's it."

The 23-year-old is a slowly reconstructing her career after a much-publicised off-court rebellion in 1993 which culminated in arrests for marijuana possession and shoplifting.



Spanish Conchita Martinez (L) congratulates her Australian Open semifinal counterpart Martina Hingis after losing the match by straight sets yesterday. — AFP photo

Hingis-Davenport finale

MELBOURNE, Jan 27: Defending champion Martina Hingis of Switzerland faces Lindsay Davenport in her fourth consecutive Australian Open tennis championship women's singles final on Saturday, reports AFP.

The top-seeded Swiss woman swept past Conchita Martinez of Spain 6-3, 6-2 in 61 minutes in Thursday's semi-finals while reigning Wimbledon champion Davenport won a hard-fought match with fellow American Jennifer Capriati 6-2, 7-6 (7/4) in one hour 22 minutes.

"I started slow but as she let me into the game and I got into my rhythm I had few problems," said Hingis, 19, who is now unbeaten in 27 singles matches at Melbourne Park.

"Looking ahead to Saturday's final, Hingis said: "Lindsay is the top player out there with her solid groundstrokes. I lost to her three times last year so I'll be trying to give it a shot. It's 1 versus 2."

Davenport leads 9-7 in matches against Hingis and has

won their last three encounters. "I think this is the dream final," Hingis added.

Hingis won Wimbledon and the US Open in 1997 but has not won another Grand Slam apart from the Australian Open since then.

She was runner-up in the French Open in 1997 and 1999 and lost the US Open final to Davenport in 1998 and Serena Williams last year.

But she did not drop a set on her way to her 10th Grand Slam final in six years.

Martinez, 27, won the 1994 Wimbledon and was beaten by Hingis in the 1998 final here.

Davenport, who gets the chance for her third Grand Slam title against Hingis, is unbeaten in her major finals. She beat Hingis at the 1998 US Open and dented seven-time champion Steffi Graf at last year's Wimbledon.

The capacity centre court crowd warmed to Capriati who played to near exhaustion.

After a topsided first set of just 23 minutes, Capriati lifted her game to take the match into a tie-break.

The breakthrough in the tiebreak came on the ninth point when a Capriati backhand found the net after another sensational rally and a late call out gave Davenport two match points.

It was a tired forehand into the net which spelled the end for Capriati and put Davenport into her first Australian Open final in eight attempts.

"Very rarely do I feel like I'm on the back foot and don't control points but I felt like that today. Some of the rallies were long and I was getting tired and was lucky to get through in two sets," Davenport said.

She paid tribute to Capriati — her one-time idol.

"She played great tennis and she'll be around for many more years," Capriati said she did not consider she was still on a comeback, saying at her press conference that she had achieved that last year.

"I was giving it everything I had to break her serve and hopefully I will be better prepared next time," she said.

It was Capriati's first Grand Slam semi-final since the 1991 US Open.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN NOTEBOOK

MELBOURNE, Jan 27 (AP): A leg injury forced Lindsay Davenport to withdraw from her doubles semifinal against

Mary Pierce and Martina Hingis, although the No 2 seed says she'll be fine for the singles final against top-ranked Hingis.

Davenport and compatriot Corina Morariu were trailing 5-0 in the opening set when Davenport pulled out, allowing Hingis and Pierce an easy route into Friday's final against the No 1 combination of Lisa Raymond and Rennae Stubbs.

Hingis is the defending singles and doubles champion at the Australian Open.

Davenport said she had a better chance in the singles final with some time to recover.

And says she has some good omens on her side.

She has a 2-0 win-loss record in Grand Slam finals, winning the US Open in 1998 and Wimbledon last year.

On both occasions she advanced to a Grand Slam final, she'd beaten an American in the semifinal and hadn't dropped a set through the tournament.

After edging American Jennifer Capriati and maintaining her record of not dropping a set this tournament, Davenport said she was confident.

HOME ADVANTAGE Martina Hingis says she virtually owns center court at Melbourne Park after winning three successive Australian Open titles. And Lindsay Davenport, her rival in Saturday's women's final, is well aware of it.

"It's going to be tough, Martina pretty much owns this court and final won some ridiculous number like 44, 45 matches in singles and doubles," here, she said. "I'm definitely the underdog going into the final."

Neither player has dropped a set en route to the final and Hingis says she's looking forward to a dream final.

"I always play on Center Court, this is my — I feel home here," said the top-ranked Swiss player. "It has been my court for the last three years. I intend to keep going one more."

TICKETLESS About 280 disgruntled tennis fans were considering legal action after a ticketing bungle meant they were not entitled to the tickets they'd purchased for the Pete Sampras-Andre Agassi semifinal.

The fans were among a group of 500 people, including American and German tourists, who purchased ticket, airfare and accommodation packages through Qantas Holidays for the Australian Open.

The Australian airline scraped together 220 tickets, mainly from sponsors and corporate areas, and issued those to people in the order in which they had booked the packages.

The others were offered 1,000 Australian dollars (650 dollars) or a free return airfare on any of its main domestic routes. The ticketless fans were also invited to watch the match on big screens in the ballroom of a nearby hotel.

A high-profile Melbourne law firm is investigating the compensation on behalf of several fans.

Some fans threatened a sit-in between day and evening sessions but tournament organisers said there was no problems involving the fans and the Melbourne Park arena had been cleared between sessions.

One angry fan said no money could compensate missing the semifinal between the No 1 and No 3 seeded Americans, which was expected to be the highlight of the tournament.

COMEBACK CREDIT Martina Hingis says she should get some of the credit for Jennifer Capriati's strong showing at the Australian Open.

The two players practice together in Saddlebrook, Florida, where Capriati lives. Hingis has a home nearby.

"I think I lifted up her motivation a little bit."

Sampras not sure

MELBOURNE, Jan 27: Australian Pete Sampras said today he might miss next week's opening Davis Cup clash against Zimbabwe because of a hip strain, reports Reuters.

Sampras had been due to partner world number one Andre Agassi in a star-studded US team, but said after being beaten by Agassi at the Australian Open that he was not sure he would make it.

After a brilliantly explosive match, Sampras narrowly lost a fourth set tie-break and then fell down 6-1 in the final set.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across, Down, and Cryptquip sections.

Cryptquip puzzle grid with letters and numbers.

LAD MV DIRGRWB RW ARMGFCLGGFLP, ELWP ALVEMVCZMVM LKD DI BMD BVIZRWB KLRWC. Yesterday's Cryptquip: COULDN'T A BARBECUE CHEF'S FAVORITE DANCE VERY EASILY BE THE CHAR-CHAR? Today's Cryptquip Clue: C equals S