

Sport

Modest Graf

AUCKLAND, Feb 1: Andre Agassi's new girlfriend, German tennis great Steffi Graf, is taking no credit for his success at last week's Australia Open...

Davis Cup 2000 set to go



PARIS, Feb 1 (AFP): The hottest name in tennis, Andre Agassi, is back on duty this week, but instead of individual glory, the Las Vegas is playing once again for his country as the 2000 Davis Cup gets underway.

once again without Pat Rafter, but his absence did not stop them capturing the Davis Cup for the first time since 1996 in December when they defeated France 3-2 in Nice.

Mark Philippoussis was the architect of that triumph with wins in both singles and he will lead the challenge from Down Under again backed by the precocious Adelaide teenager Lleyton Hewitt.

The Australians start the defence of the Cup away to Switzerland who have been given by a bitter dispute opposing captain Jakob Hlasek and top player Marc Rosset.

The towering Rosset has refused to play for the Czech-born Hlasek leaving youngsters Roger Federer and George Basil to defend their colours.

Britain, without a Davis Cup title since 1936, must do without Greg Rusedski who is still recovering from a foot operation which has kept the world's fastest server out of competition so far this year.

That leaves Tim Henman as the only Briton of note against the Czech Republic on the slow clay courts of Ostrava and although Jiri Novak and Slava Dosedel are hardly top-notch players, it is difficult to see where captain David Lloyd's three points will come from.

Germany up against the Netherlands are without top player Nicolas Pietrangeli who is deeply suspicious about Davis Cup play and who says that he prefers this year to concentrate on his own ranking and the Sydney Olympics.

In his absence Tommy Haas and Rainer Schuttler will go up against Paul Haarhuis and Sjeng Schalken in what looks like an even contest in Leipzig.

There seems little to choose also between Brazil and France on the clay courts of Florianopolis.

Brazil have an experienced, if out of form, singles duo of Gustavo Kuerten and Fernando Meligeni, while veteran Cedric Pioline, who powered the French to the final last year, has able backing from Jerome Golmard and Nicolas Escude.

On the face of it, Russia should have little difficulty in ousting Belgium in Moscow.

But beaten Australian Open finalist Yevgeny Kafelnikov has only five days to shake of his disappointment, while number two Marat Safin was booted off the court in Melbourne after a pitiful straight-sets, first round exit against Grant Stafford.

The Belgians have a promising clutch of youngsters in Christophe and Olivier Rochus and Christophe Van Grasse.

Clay courtiers will battle it out in Murcia when Spain and Italy go head to head and here the Spaniards with Alex Corretja, Albert Costa and Francisco Clavet are simply better one-on-one than Andrea Gaudenzi, Diego Nargiso and Davide Sanguinetti.

The final tie in the elite top 16 group favours Slovakia at home to Austria in Bratislava with Karol Kucera and Dominik Hrbaty at the helm.

All the ties are Friday through Sunday with the winners going on to the quarter-finals and the losers facing a relegation battle against the winners from the second division.

Beijing reveals its plans

BEIJING, Feb 1: China today launched its campaign to bring the 2008 Olympic Games to Beijing 500 days before the International Olympic Committee (IOC) meets to declare a winner for the hotly-contested prize, reports AFP.

The Beijing bid logo was chosen from some 2,000 designs and represents a five-point star drawn in Chinese calligraphy brushstrokes, with the five-colored Olympic rings forming the points of the star.

The star is also in a shape of a "Chinese knot," symbolizing "unity, cooperation and exchanges," as well as a person doing "Taiji" or traditional Chinese shadow boxing, he said.

"Time is of the essence, this is a big undertaking for us and with the support of the central government and leaders, we will do our best to make efforts to struggle for the right to hold the games," he said at a meeting of the organizing committee.

The slogan for the games "new Beijing, Great Olympics" was chosen from more than 30,000 entries, he said.

"China has the biggest population in the world and by hosting the games the Chinese people will have a chance to contribute to world peace and global unity," he said.

He Zhenliang, member of the IOC executive board and chairman of Beijing's unsuccessful bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games, said Beijing's chances were much better than its previous attempt which failed by a single vote in 1993 largely because of China's human rights record.

"This time we have a lot more experience so the chances are much better and besides the international situation has also changed," he told AFP.

So far written applications to host the games have been sent to IOC headquarters from Istanbul, Havana, Osaka (Japan), Paris, Beijing, Bangkok, Seville (Spain) and Toronto, the IOC said last week.

In addition to the seven who have already applied, bids are also expected from Buenos Aires, Cairo, Cape Town and Kuala Lumpur in the coming days.

Attending the meeting was Beijing party secretary and Chairman of the bid, Jia Qinglin and Wu Shaoyu, president of the All-China Sports Federation.

'Change Davis Cup schedule'

HARARE, Feb 1: US Davis Cup captain John McEnroe slammed the scheduling of the competition on Monday, saying major tournaments should not be slotted so close together, reports Reuters.

McEnroe said the scheduling had been a major reason for the withdrawal from the World Group tie against Zimbabwe this week of Pete Sampras and Todd Martin, who both played the Australian Open that ended on Sunday.

"The Davis Cup schedule needs to be changed, there's no doubt... and the sooner the better for the sport in general," McEnroe told reporters.

"I don't think we should have something that I'd like to consider as important as the Grand Slams a week after a Grand Slam. It doesn't make sense, the sport needs a break."

McEnroe earlier predicted on Monday his team would find it tough in the first round tie against Zimbabwe with Sampras and Martin absent.

"He told me when we first talked about it that the idea of coming right after a major event... that if he had a tough loss it was tough for him to get over it quickly," McEnroe said of Sampras, who lost to compatriot Andre Agassi in the Australian Open semifinals on Thursday.

Ahead of his first tie as captain, McEnroe said the high profile pair had been replaced by the "equally competent" Chris Woodruff and doubles specialist Rick Leach.

McEnroe, who arrived in Harare on Sunday with team manager Jeff Ryan, told reporters the Americans would have to cope with both the high altitude and the experienced Black brothers, Byron and Wayne.

Sampras pulled out because of a strained right hip, aggravated during his five-set loss to Agassi. Martin complained of feeling lethargic at the Open after losing in the second round.



Chinese sports officials during a press conference to announce Beijing's bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing yesterday. — AFP photo

Ottey will run in Valencia



MADRID, Feb 1: Jamaican sprinter Merlene Ottey is to run in the Valencia indoor meeting on Wednesday despite being embroiled in a doping controversy, the athlete's agent confirmed on Monday, reports Reuters.

Ottey's outing in Valencia will be her first since the announcement of a positive test for the banned steroid nandrolone last summer.

The athlete's agent Daniel Zimmermann said she would run only the 60 metres in Valencia, the distance at which she was the 1995 world indoor champion.

Meeting organisers defended their decision to invite Ottey to the first major athletics event in the city since the 1998 European Indoor Championships.

"We have an obligation to make the meeting as attractive as possible," a representative of the organisers Unipublic said.

Unipublic said no pressure has yet been put on them, by either the Spanish athletics federation (RFEA) or the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF), to withdraw their invitation to Ottey.

However, RFEA president Jose Maria Odrizola said he would urge the meeting organisers to reconsider their position.

"We can't oblige them to do anything because legally she is not banned. But it would be bad for athletics. It also gives the impression that in Spain we are soft on doping," Odrizola said.

Odrizola, a professor of biochemistry, is also an IAAF Council member and a vehement anti-doping campaigner.

Ottey pulled out of a meeting in Karlsruhe, Germany, on Saturday after her planned appearance provoked a storm of protest from the German athletics federation and the IAAF.

"I made the decision to withdraw her while she was on the plane to Frankfurt on Friday night. The pressure on the organiser was just too great for the German federation and the IAAF. It was having a devastating effect on all the athletes," Zimmermann told Reuters by telephone from his office in Liechtenstein.

He added that the action of the German federation was being discussed with their lawyers with a view to taking legal action.

"However, we don't anticipate similar problems in Spain."

The organisers have checked with the Spanish federation and their sponsors. They (the organisers) still want Merlene to run," Zimmermann added.

Ottey produced a positive dope test at a meeting in Lucerne on July 5 but the news only emerged on August 18, two days before the start of the world championships in Seville in which she was due to compete for a record seventh time.

Ottey has vowed to clear her name and has strenuously denied all allegations of drug-taking.

The Jamaican federation subsequently cleared Ottey, who has won 14 world championship medals and seven Olympic medals, of any wrongdoing in November.

The IAAF have yet to accept the decision and has convened its arbitration panel but under its regulations Ottey is entitled to race until the sport's governing body bans her.

"We know that the meeting organisers are sticking strictly to the rules but there is also a strong possibility that the IAAF will sanction her. It would be a joke if Ottey ran in Valencia," Odrizola added.

Playing cricket Pacific style

AUCKLAND, Feb 1: (AFP): Cricket: the dull and boring game played by men in white flannels right?

Not the way it will be played here this month when the Pacific version of the game — *Kilikiti* finally gets centre stage at Eden Park, New Zealand's home of the English game.

In an instant everything will change — the men, for one thing, will be wearing colourful lavalava or skirts, they'll be armed with fearsome looking three-sided clubs and the solid natural rubber balls will make a cricket six look like a quiet schoolboy knock.

The New Zealand Herald reported Monday that during the break in the one-day international between Australia and New Zealand on February 19, the champion sides in an Auckland *kilikiti* competition will play an exhibition game.

*Kilikiti* is the off-spring of the London Missionary Society's assignment to civilise the natives in the Pacific in the 19th Century. But the way it turned out was perhaps not what the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) had in mind.

Forget 11-men teams. Quickly the Pacific adopted a variation to that rule — the whole village could form a team. Away games were a substitute for war: entire villages of men, women and children all playing. Wickets were any uprights that could be found and forget the smack of willow on leather.

Willow doesn't grow in the Pacific so any wood would do, provided it produced a grumpy man-sized weapon. At first balls were a tad bit until

some one had the bright idea of using fresh rubber latex to make the balls. And lots of them — because when a hefty Samoan with a mighty bat connects with a tiny bouncy ball something really flies.

Lots of local rules came into play as a result — balls into the lagoon could be acceptable in one village, a disadvantage in another.

*Kilikiti* quickly moved away from cricket. Nothing illustrates it more than traditional cricket's law 42.6 "Incommoding the striker" which says its wrong for the fielding side to distract the striker "by any noise or action." An important — perhaps crucial — part of any *kilikiti* training session is to focus on the on-field chants and dance steps... And that's real dance.

Video-umpiring was a no-go back then, but the Pacific Islanders had their committees, and long into the night discussions between elders would occur to determine who won. It is usually a political outcome.

*Kilikiti* is still played widely in Polynesia — even in places like Funafuti in Tuvalu which is a tiny atoll barely wider than a cricket pitch, so local rules come into play.

Samoa became particularly obsessed by the game to the utter fury of the up-tight German administrators.

They saw it as a tremendous waste of time and banned, without any success, the ceremonies, feasting and dancing that accompanied any inter-village tournament.

Some said the New Zealand military administration wh

took over in 1914 only really got one thing ever right in Samoa — they played cricket too.

Auckland, which claims to be the capital city of Polynesia, has a long tradition of both games during the summer and in recent years the Pacific game has become a major part of school sport.

The game has become more formalised — the days of entire villages has gone although in the church league entire parishes can have the right to bat — and a national championship climaxed over the weekend. The Stormers beat Happy Days in the men's final and Lau Lau Farani beat the Gardenias in the women's.

Brazil drops bid for 2008 Games

RIO DE JANEIRO, Feb 1: Brazil is dropping its candidacy for the 2008 Olympics to better prepare for a bid in 2012, the country's Olympic committee president said Monday, reports AP.

Carlos Arthur Nuzman told reporters that Rio Mayor Luiz Paulo Conde to discuss a plan to better structure the city's candidacy for the 2007 Pan-American Games and the 2012 Olympics.

According to Nuzman, the idea is to give the city time to create the conditions necessary to promote a stronger candidacy.

Thorpe eases thru heats

SHEFFIELD, England, Feb 1: Ian Thorpe, who broke a world record on his last World Cup appearance, eased through the morning's heats as the series its first European stop of the season on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

The 17-year-old Australian, the youngest men's world champion in history, led qualifiers for the evening's finals in the opening 100 metres freestyle and later cruised through the 400 metres freestyle heats in the third-fastest overall time.

Thorpe clocked 49.05 seconds in the 100, comfortably faster than Americans Dan Phillips and Jared Schroeder (49.91), and settled for an unhurried three minutes 50.77 seconds in winning his heat in the 400 — more than 15 seconds slower than his best.

American Chad Carvin led the way in the 400, winning his heat in 3:46.47 from French teenager Guy-Noel Schmitt who clocked 3:49.10 for the second-quickest aggregate time.

Thorpe, just 15 when he won the world long-course 400 metres freestyle title in Perth in January 1998, broke his own world short-course 200 metres freestyle record at the last World Cup meeting in his native Sydney last month and expectations are high whenever he hits the water.

Thorpe, one of eight Australians taking part in this two-day meeting in the Ponds Forge 25-metre pool, is competing in Britain for the first time.

Fellow Australian Josh Watson claimed the fastest heat time of 54.40 in the men's 100 metres backstroke, ahead of American world long-course champion Lenny Krayzelburg (54.69), while compatriot Dyrna Calub set the pace in the women's 50 and 200 metres backstroke heats.

Britain's James Hickman posted the fastest qualifying times in both the 200 metres butterfly and 100 metres individual medley leading the way in the butterfly event by more than three seconds from American Olympic silver medalist Tom Malchow.

It's my first race of the year and in the final I'm going to do what I did this morning — just get in there and go. I'm expecting a good race from Tom, world short-course champion Hickman said.

Fifteen-year-old Yang Yu, who turned in some rapid times in the World Cup meetings in Shanghai and Hong Kong in January, led the way in the women's 200 metres freestyle heats, while Ruan Yi, another recent Chinese revelation, qualified with something to spare in the 100 metres butterfly.

Gosper denies wrongdoing

SYDNEY, Feb 1: Australia's top International Olympic Committee (IOC) official Kevin Gosper has asked the IOC's ethics commission to investigate a trip he and his family made to Salt Lake City, reports Reuters.

IOC vice-president Gosper released a statement on Monday to say that there was "no improper behaviour" when he and his wife and two children made the visit to Salt Lake City in December 1993.

Gosper, who is a member of the ethics panel but will stand down while his case is investigated, said he had referred the matter, raised by a journalist, to the IOC because he had nothing to hide.

He said in the statement that the trip was a private family holiday which they paid for themselves.

"While regretting the slur on our reputation, we welcome the existence of the IOC Ethics Commission which provides an independent forum to establish there was no improper behaviour," he said.

Australia's other IOC member, Phil Coles, last year received a severe reprimand from the IOC for accepting lavish hospitality from Salt Lake City, the site for the 2002 Winter Olympics.

Coles also stood down from the organising committee for the 2000 Olympics, SOCOG.

SOCOG president Michael Knight said on Monday he welcomed Gosper's decision to bring the matter to the public's attention rather than let it fester.

"In effect he's been his own whistleblower," a spokesman for Knight said.

"He's put the matter on the record before anyone can jump to conclusions."



Frenchman Julien Lorcy (L) looks at his Spaniard opponent Oscar Garcia Cano as the latter taking a tumble during their European lightweight title bout in Paris on January 31. Lorcy won on points. — AFP photo

McEnroe, Agassi pair off

LONDON, Feb 1: Andre Agassi and John McEnroe, two of the greatest showmen in modern tennis, join forces in Harare this weekend at the start of their campaign to bring the Davis Cup back to the United States, reports Reuters.

To secure the top international tennis prize for the first time since 1995, the US must take time out of a hectic season's schedule to play four rounds of the three-day team competition involving defending champions Australia, runners-up France and 13 other nations.

McEnroe took over as US captain last October determined to spark in the American team the same passion for the Davis Cup that he felt as a player.

He has world number one Agassi, crowned Australian Open champion last Sunday, on his side but beaten semifinalist Pete Sampras has withdrawn with a hip strain suffered against Agassi during their epic five-set semifinal at Melbourne Park. Todd Martin also pulled out after the Open.

The United States have had a tough time in recent years persuading top players to drag their attentions away from the lucrative men's tour for Davis Cup.

McEnroe blames bad scheduling for diminishing the Cup's importance.

"I don't think we should have something that I'd like to consider as important as the Grand Slams a week after a Grand Slam. The sport needs a break," he said.

Chris Woodruff and doubles specialist Rick Leach have been drafted in to join Agassi and Alex O'Brien in the team for the first round against Zimbabwe where they must overcome the experienced brothers Byron and Wayne Black.

The surface is going to be quick because of the altitude and there are not going to be a lot of real long points. It's not going to be easy but we came here to try and win and that's what we are planning to do," McEnroe said.

Back in Europe defending champions Australia, who took the title in Nice last December, play a Swiss team weakened by internal squabbling.

Davis Cup stalwart Marc Rosset pulled out after his former partner Jakob Hlasek was named captain without any consultation with the players. That left a youthful team of Roger Federer, George Bastl, Lorenzo Mantia and Michel T.

Germany, who won the title three times between 1988 and 1993, take on the Netherlands in Leipzig while Spain, beaten by Brazil last year, meet Italy on clay in Murcia.

Beaten Australian Open finalist Yevgeny Kafelnikov will have had less than a week to overcome jetlag before leading Russia against Belgium.

But the fast indoor surface in Moscow was laid to suit the world number two and his singles team mate Marat Safin.

Britain who have not won the trophy since 1936 go to Ostrava to take on the Czech Republic without big-serving Greg Rusedski who is injured.

Top Briton Tim Henman will be supported by little known Neil Broad, Jaime Delgado and Arvind Parmar against Jiri Novak, Slava Dosedel, Michal Tabara and David Rik.

Neighbours Slovakia and Austria, who ousted Sweden to return to the world group for the first time in four years, meet in Bratislava on a slow man-made surface that should suit the visitors well.

Australian captain John Newcombe is too experienced a campaigner to talk up his side's chances, however.

The Swiss are a good team. Federer is a very good young player. They are playing at home so any tie that is going to be a difficult one," he said.

But with big-hitting Mark Philippoussis, teenage prodigy Lleyton Hewitt and the solid backup of Sandon Stolle and Wayne Arthurs, Australia look hard to beat even in the unaccustomed chill of the European winter.

France have an awkward tie in Florianopolis in southern Brazil where home support will be at its most raucous for local boy Gustavo Kuerten, a former French Open champion.

Temperatures have soared in the town recently, but the weather broke on Tuesday dampening the clay court surface that suits both teams.

Seasoned campaigner Cedric Pioline spearheads the French challenge which also includes Jerome Golmard, Nicolas Escude and Sebastian Grosjean.



Legendary German soccer player Lothar Matthaeus and his girlfriend Maren Mueller-Wohlfarth talk during a ceremony organised to mark the centennial founding anniversary of the German Football Federation in Leipzig on January 28. — Internet photo

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer. 16 Merry Widow composer. 20 Peruke. 23 Lumox. 24 Formerly. 25 Stir-fry utensils. 26 Offspring of 19. 27 Others (Latin). 28 Teens' hangout. 29 Drag along. 32 Okay to drink. 33 Trunks. 35 Scout group. 36 Leaps. 38 Fortunate. 42 Parlor piece. 43 Part of the loop. 44 Catch sight of. 45 Slaloming. 46 Little Teapot. 47 de plume. 49 At 17' singer.