

Nat'l cheers qualifiers

Sports Reporter

International Master Abdul-lah Al Rakib took the solo lead with 5.5 points at the end of the sixth round games of the Preliminary phase of 26th National Chess Championship at the NSC Chess Room yesterday.

Rakib beat Abul Kashem Bhuiyan in this round. Seven players who are closely following the table leader having collected five points each are: Syed Ruhul Kabir Shiplu, Kashem, Taibur Rahman Sumon, Sawkat Hossain Polab, Abu Sufian Sakil, Aminul Islam and Monir Hossain.

Enamul Hossain Razib, Syed Mahfuzur Rahman Inan, Kayes Hasan, Javed, Dewan Shahidul Amin and Arifuzzaman Shikder jointly shared the third place, collecting four and a half point each.

The seventh round games will start at 3:00 p.m. today.

Inter-varsity cricket begins tomorrow

RAJSHAHI, Feb 12: The inter-varsity cricket competition will begin at Rajshahi University cricket grounds on Monday, reports UNB.

On the opening day, hosts Rajshahi University will take on Bangladesh Agricultural University while Dhaka University to face Islami University at Saheed Habibur Rahman Hall ground.

Vice-chancellor of Rajshahi University Prof M Saidur Rahman will inaugurate the meet.

Six teams split into two groups will take part in the competition.

Group A: Dhaka University, Islami University and Khulna University.

Group B: Rajshahi University, Jahangirnagar University and Bangladesh Agricultural University.

The final of the competition will be held on February 20.

Simpson slams ICC U-turn

SYDNEY, Feb 12 (Internet report): Former Test captain Bob Simpson, in Sydney preparing for a return to coaching with English county championship side Lancashire, has expressed his disappointment at the International Cricket Council's decision to strip its special illegal bowling action committee of any powers.

The ICC, in a landmark decision, announced on Wednesday that it had revoked the powers of its advisory panel to ban bowlers with suspect action - thereby reversing the decision to ban Pakistani pacer Shoaib Akhtar from Test cricket.

But Simpson, one of the representatives of the nine Test match-playing nations on the advisory panel, said: "I don't want to say anything on the matter until I have read the report from the ICC meeting and have spoken to officials, but I believe the committee was serving a very useful purpose."

The ICC will review Shoaib's action in talks with Pakistani officials next week. The ICC will also look at recommendations from the Pakistan Cricket Board, which will report back on measures to remedy Shoaib's illegal bounce.

The ICC has made its decision before Pakistan's first Test against Sri Lanka, which starts on February 26.

Croatia Zagreb renamed Dynamo

ZAGREB, Feb 12: Croatia Zagreb is set Monday to be renamed Dynamo Zagreb - the name under which it has always been known to its most faithful supporters, reports AFP.

Former Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, who died in December, changed the club's name to Croatia Zagreb in 1993 - a move which met with fierce opposition from the club's fans. He was frequently heckled with chants of "Dynamo, Dynamo" by supporters, who had seen the club first as a symbol of resistance to the former Federal Yugoslavia and then later as a rallying point against the Tudjman regime.

A vote on the return to the name Dynamo will be held Monday at the club's general meeting and it seems a foregone conclusion that the club will revert to Dynamo.

Tudjman's party, the nationalist HDZ, has lost power in Croatia since the former president's death and that is likely to end a culture of political interference that saw the controversial politician decide on the hiring and firing of coaches and bankroll the club with public money.

Tudjman renamed the club Croatia Zagreb as he wanted it to represent on the international stage the fledgling nation he led to independence from Yugoslavia after a bloody secessionist war.

Club president Zlatko Cankar, an associate of the late head-of-state, in fact raised the possibility of a name change in November while Tudjman lay dying in hospital.

River Plate coach quits

BUENOS AIRES, Feb 12: Ramon Diaz quit as coach of Argentine champions River Plate on Friday, two days before the start of the new Clausura season, after the club rejected his requests for new players, reports Reuters.



Corinthians trainer Felipe Scolari (L) receiving the trophy of the Best Head Coach of America-1999 from Uruguayan Martin Aguirre on February 10. —AFP photo

Wenger unimpressed by Van Nistelrooy



LONDON, Feb 12: Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said Friday he was not interested in signing Dutch star Ruud van Nistelrooy and plans to give Dennis Bergkamp the chance to prove he still has what it takes, reports AFP.

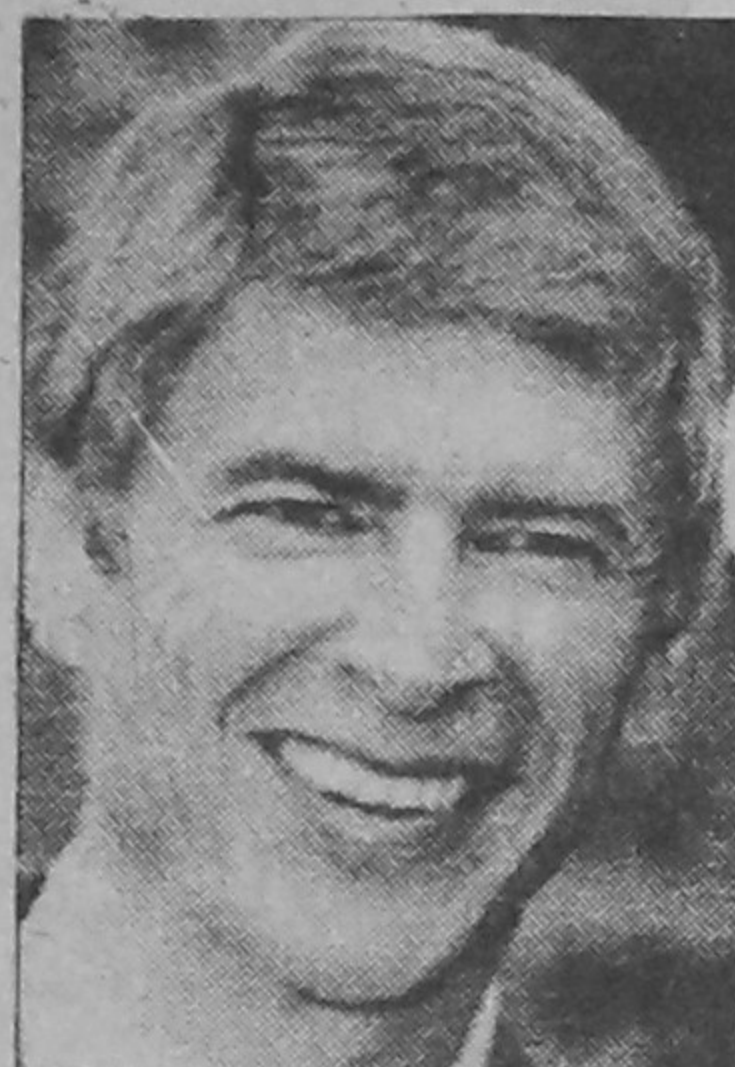
Wenger was in Holland Thursday night, among a large gathering of top European club managers including Chelsea's Gianluca Vialli, to watch van Nistelrooy score a hat-trick for PSV Eindhoven in a 4-0 win over Ajax to bring his goal tally for the season to 21 in 19 games. But even though the 23-year-old striker was strongly recommended to Wenger by Newcastle's former PSV boss Bobby Robson and has also had glowing references from fellow Dutchmen Bergkamp and Marc Overmars at Highbury, the Arsenal boss said he was unimpressed with what he saw.

"He's a very good player, the star striker in Holland at the moment, but it was certainly not only him that I had a look at."

"You always have to keep looking for the future and because there was a top match in a different league on a Thursday

night I took the opportunity to see it."

"But it was a poor game. PSV were 3-0 up after only 20 minutes and it was never a contest. Nobody played really well."



ARSENE WENGER

Wenger knows that van Nistelrooy, who has reportedly expressed a preference to play in England next season could cost 20 million pounds (\$32 million dollars) if PSV decided to put him up for sale.

Suggestions that Roma have already offered 18 million pounds and Chelsea 15 million pounds have cut no ice with Wenger who laughed: "That is up to them."

But van Nistelrooy is sure to challenge Bergkamp, 30, and Barcelona's Patrick Kluivert for a striking role in the Holland team for the Euro 2000 finals this summer and there is no doubt that Wenger is facing a dilemma over the future of his own increasingly injury-prone Dutch star at Highbury.

Bergkamp, who is out of contract at Highbury at the end of next season and has yet to open discussions on a new one, is finally fit to return against Liverpool on Sunday having missed 13 games with groin and calf injuries.

"He's fully fit again, let's say that," said Wenger, "and he's the type of player like (Nigerian Nwankwo) Kanu - a link between midfield and the strikers - who we have also missed and to have him back is of course very important."

"I think he would be happy to finish his career at Arsenal and although he has only one year left on his contract I believe we will solve that question soon, along with a few other players who also have one year to go."

Blatter gives Boliva his blessings



LA PAZ, Feb 12: FIFA president Sepp Blatter gave Bolivia the green light Friday evening to continue playing their home international matches here in the highest capital city in the world at 3600m (11810 feet) in the Andes, reports AFP.

Bolivia's Latin American rivals, led by Brazil and Uruguay, had been campaigning against playing at altitude, saying it posed a risk to the health of their players but Blatter made it clear that Bolivia would retain the right to play at the Estadio Hernando Siles, known here affectionately as El Nido del Condor (the Condor's Nest).

The ruling will also apply to Ecuador and Colombia who also play in the Andes although their Quito and Bogota bases are less high than Bolivia's.

FIFA's medical committee had been monitoring the situation since 1996 but Blatter's unequivocal comments have ended the discussion.

Originally a decision date had been set for March 23 - five days before Bolivia begin their qualification campaign for the 2002 World Cup with an away match against Uruguay in Montevideo but Blatter was categorical.

"Bolivians can sleep in peace, I want to end this debate once and for all," said the Swiss diplomat at the end of a two-day visit to the country.

Speaking in the presence of the country's President Hugo Banzer at the Palacio Quemado,

the head-of-state's official residence, Blatter said: "In Bolivia there are many cultures, people of different entities but the most important thing for me was to see the hope in the eyes of young boys and girls that in this country where football is so important that the game should not be affected by altitude."



SEPP BLATTER

"The universality of football does not permit the world governing body (FIFA) even less it's president to forbid or cast a veto against a people who have been playing football at this height for more than a hundred years."

Blatter's remarks were greeted with elation by his hosts who had welcomed the FIFA president with a reception that would have done justice to a visiting head-of-state.

He was greeted on arrival at La Paz airport - which at 3800m

above sea level is even higher than the city it serves - by a bizarre supposedly impromptu in truth orchestrated - women's football match between two teams drawn from the indigenous Aymara community, who wore national costumes including long hongs - a kind of sombrero - as they played in front of their families.

The aim was clearly to show Blatter - a big supporter of women's football - that at 3600m the Condor's Nest "was by local standards as good as it gets in terms of altitude."

Blatter, accompanied by former French star Michel Platini, then visited "the Condor's Nest" where he was greeted by thousands of children. He next moved on to meet Banzer where he gave the hosts the verdict they had been waiting for.

During his two-day visit he had previously visited the holiday resort of Santa Cruz before moving on to Cochabamba, in the Andes foothills, where he was decorated with the highest honour of the Bolivian Football Federation (FBF).

Blatter's decision have made him the most popular man in Bolivia - at least for the time being - with crowds calling out "Thank you Mr Blatter, thank you Mr Blatter" as he left the country to fly to Paraguay where the South American Football Federations are meeting.

Clearly moved Blatter said: "Since my arrival in this country I have been received with an open heart at all levels of the country."



Bolivian soccer fans singing outside the La Paz Airport as they are waiting for the arrival of FIFA president Sepp Blatter on February 11. —Internet photo

Davis Cup Spain-Russia qtrs at Malaga

MADRID, Feb 12: The Davis Cup quarterfinal match between Spain and Russia will be played at Malaga from April 7-9, the Spanish Tennis Federation said Friday, reports AFP.

It is almost certain that the tie will be played on clay - the preferred surface of Spanish players - but this is yet to be confirmed.

Spain and Russia qualified for the last eight with 4-1 trouncings of Italy and Belgium respectively.

Spain have tremendous strength in depth and will have trouble deciding on their line-up with Carlos Moya, Alex Corretja, Felix Mantilla, Albert Costa and Francisco Clavet all keen to play for their country.

Sarah slams Serena

PARIS, Feb 12: Defending champion Serena Williams breezed her way into the semi-finals at the indoor Paris Open on Friday - but then found herself the recipient of a huge serve from beaten opponent Sarah Pitkowski, reports AFP.

Top-seeded American beat her French rival 6-1, 6-1 in their quarterfinal match but Pitkowski then launched a stinging attack on what she perceived as her rival's lack of sportsmanship.

Pitkowski accused Williams - the fourth-ranked player on the WTA Tour and winner of five events last year - of trying to psyche out opponents by brushing close to them in the dressing room and of trying to stare them out.

"She doesn't show any respect for other people, so I have no respect for her," said the French player.

"She's a real actress - and she plays it to the hilt both on and off the court. She deserves an Oscar. It was frustrating for me to lose to someone who shows so little respect."

Rosset downs Ivanisevic

MARSEILLE, France, Feb 12: Marc Rosset beat Croatia's Goran Ivanisevic in the quarterfinals of the Marseille Open on Friday and said he was hoping for an all-Swiss final, reports Reuters.

"I would love a 100 per cent Swiss final. It would be a first in our country's tennis history," said Rosset after his compatriot Roger Federer's victory over another Croatian, Ivan Ljubicic.

Rosset, champion here in 1993 and 1994, beat Ivanisevic 6-4, 3-6, 6-2. In today's semi-finals he will meet the winner of the last quarterfinals between Frenchman Sebastien Grosjean and Swede Andreas Vinciguerra.

Federer, who beat Croatian Ivan Ljubicic 6-2, 3-6, 7-6, faces defending champion Fabrice Santoro of France in his semi-final.

Sixth seed Santoro beat compatriot Thierry Guardiola 6-4, 7-6.

Rosset said: "To play against Ivanisevic is always very special. You go from disappointment to disappointment and you end up making the break when you least expect it."

Ivanisevic, who hit 22 aces to Rosset's 12, mixed some great shots reminiscent of his best days with unforced errors.

Federer, the world junior champion in 1998, saved two match points in the final set of his quarterfinal.

C'wealth TT C'ships on

SINGAPORE, Feb 12: Five teams from Africa failed to make it to the 14th Commonwealth Table Tennis Championships that began here Friday, leaving the field weak, reports AFP.

Among the non-arrivals was the Nigerian men's team, who were seeded third in the competition, leaving the field clear for New Zealand to sail through to the second stage of the competition with easy wins over Wales and South Africa in Group C.

In fact, that was the only group where the teams had not yet confirmed their places in the second stage groupings.

The top two teams from each of four groups advance to the seeded groups that play-off for the top eight placings. The rest play in the other two groups to decide the nine to 16th places.

Apart from Nigeria, Ghana failed to field their men's and women's teams, while Uganda only entered their men's team.

Some players from the three countries are actually in town, but none have sufficient numbers to participate in the team event. The players will be able to enter the individual competitions that begin on Monday.

Wales seems to hold the edge over the South Africans as their top player Ryan Jenkins managed to take two matches in the best-of-seven contest that features six singles and a doubles match.

The Welsh lost 2-4 to the Kiwis, while the South Africans were blanked 0-4 in the first stage. The losers face off Saturday to decide which team stays in the hunt for the top bracket.

The seeded teams all had a smooth passage, taking their appointed places in the second round.

Hosts Singapore had the double joy of seeing their men's and women's teams sailing through, while India had to remain content with the second spot in the group in both sections.

The men's teams that will figure in the top eight are top seeded Canada and second seeded England along with Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, India and hosts Singapore.

Williams, Kournikova thru'



PARIS, Feb 12: Teenage stars Serena Williams of the United States and Anna Kournikova of Russia stayed on target for a possible final showdown with impressive quarterfinal victories Friday in the 535,000-dollar WTA Tour Indoor Paris Open, reports AFP.

Defending champion Williams trounced Sarah Pitkowski of France 6-1, 6-1 in just 52min while fourth-seeded Kournikova recovered her concentration in time and eventually cruised to a 4-6, 6-4, 6-2 win over Irina Spirlea.

Top-seeded Williams earned herself a semifinal meeting Saturday with third-seeded French player Julie Halard-Decugis, while Kournikova - who

is currently negotiating to make a modelling appearance in Vogue magazine - will also face a French opponent in second-seeded Nathalie Tauziat.

Williams, who won her first title here 12 months ago, is bidding to follow in the footsteps of Martina Navratilova - who won here in 1993 and 1994 - as a winner of two straight Paris titles.

The powerful American began with a pair of double faults but quickly got her act together and was not seriously troubled by Pitkowski, who was dubbed "Pitbull" by the French press after her comeback victory over fifth-seeded compatriot Amelie Mauresmo on Thursday.

Williams, who has yet to drop a set in the tournament, completely outgunned petite Pitkowski with her ferocious

groundstrokes. "I didn't really have too much problem - her game suited me," said 18-year-old Williams. "I was really ready today - and when you are ready you play well."

Williams said she had "re-evaluated" her play after her shock Australian Open loss to Elena Likhovtseva last month and worked hard during 10 days off.

"She was just too tough," admitted a shellshocked Pitkowski, who said the loss hurt because she dislikes the cocky Williams. "She doesn't treat people with any respect, so I have no respect for her," she said.

Kournikova, like Williams 18, fought back from a set and a break down to beat experienced Romanian Spirlea in their quarter-final and stayed on track for the first WTA Tour title of her career - a target she believes is just around the corner.

"I'm getting closer and closer," Kournikova said. "I'm developing a more complete game, a more mature game, and if I keep working hard then it will happen."

Spirlea appeared on target for victory when she led 6-4, 2-0.

Kournikova steered herself, however, and hit the ball deep and hard to counter her 26-year-old opponent's greater physical strength. She moved her sluggish rival increasingly around the court as the match progressed.

Kournikova, who will next week be ranked a career-high ninth on the WTA Tour rankings, beat 40th-ranked Spirlea for the first time in their three meetings.

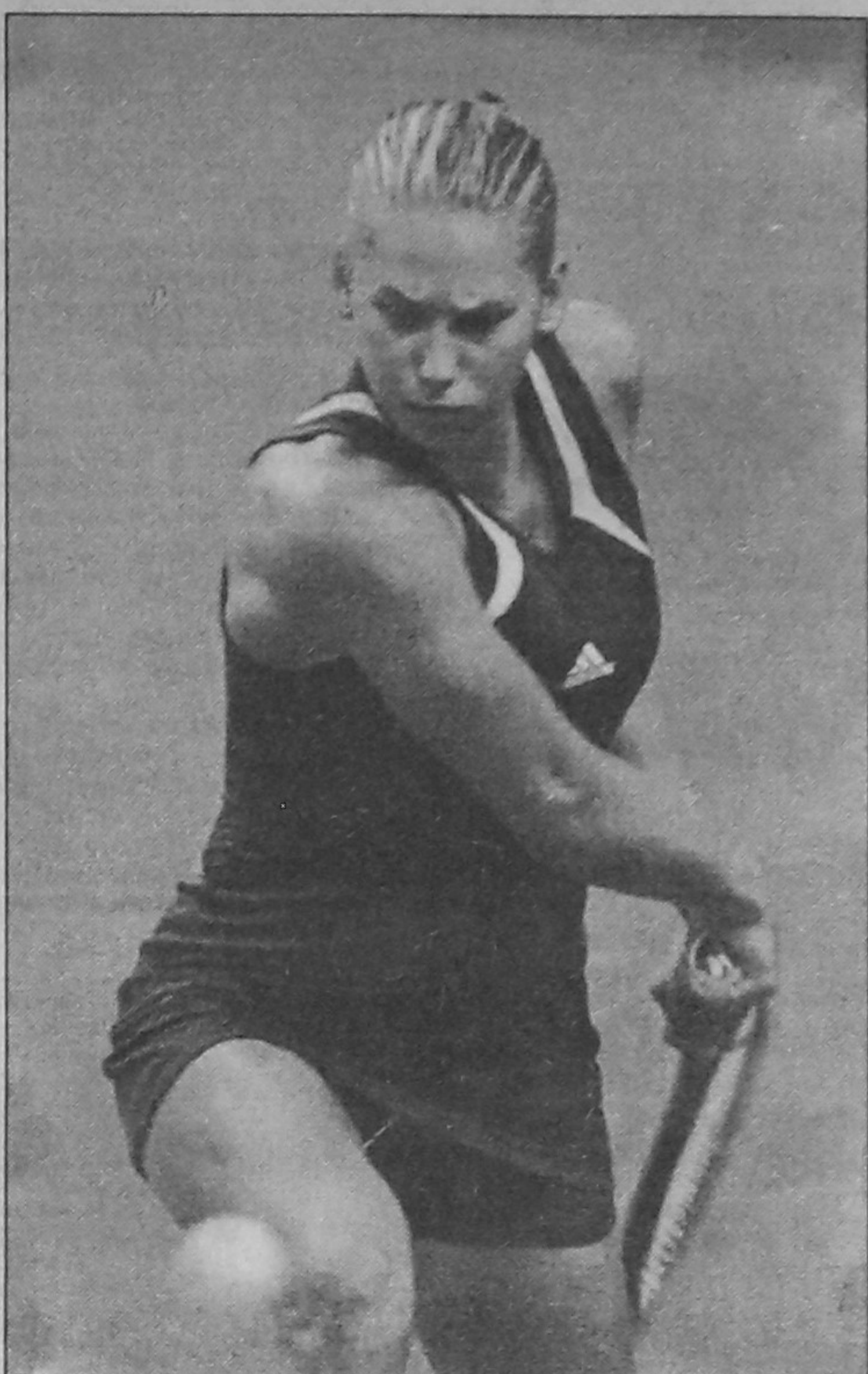
She reeled off four straight games from 2-2 in the final set to clinch her win in 1hr 30min at the Pierre de Coubertin Stadium.

"It's always difficult to play against Irina," Kournikova said. "You always have to be careful because she can hit winners - and you have to work for every point. I played well, though, especially in the third set when I needed to play well."

Halard-Decugis, the 1996 Paris champion who is currently ranked a career-high eighth, sealed her final four spot beat her fast-rising young compatriot Nathalie Dechy, 6-2, 6-4 in just 68min.

Tauziat, meanwhile, beat her 20-year-old left-handed compatriot Anne-Gaëlle Sidot 7-5, 6-1.

A record five French players made it to the quarterfinals but only two - veterans Halard-Decugis and Tauziat - will play in the semis.



Russian Anna Kournikova playing against Irina Spirlea at the Paris Open on February 11. —AFP photo

Courier reaches last four



SAN JOSE, California, Feb 12: Former world number one Jim Courier showed signs his one-time elite form may be returning when he outlasted Paul Goldstein 6-4, 6-4 and charged into the semi-finals of the 375,000 dollars Swiss Open on Friday, reports Reuters.

Courier, the fifth seed, will face Australian second seed and defending champion Mark Philippoussis, who held off a spirited challenge from limping American Justin Gimelstob 7-6, 6-4.

Seventh seed Wayne Ferreira of South Africa will face unseeded Swede Mikael Tillstrom in the other semifinal.

As is his trademark, Courier came out slugging, ripping forehands and returns and breaking his sometime practice partner in the first game. Goldstein effectively counter-punched at times, but couldn't manage to unearth his fellow American from his favourite position in the left corner of the court.

"Jim was able to dictate with his forehand and knocked some balls off," Goldstein said. "I felt I played great but Jim took the big points away from me."

Courier was happy to throw roundhouse hooks.

"I've always been a puncher from the get-go," Courier said. "I got on him early but he's a

scrapper and got tougher as the match wore on."

In 1999, Courier seemed to come up with an injury every time he got on a hot streak. He hopes the same fate doesn't befall him today.

"You watch. It's the semis. I'm playing well and something bad is bound to happen," said Courier, who is 2-3 lifetime against Philippoussis but won their last meeting.

Philippoussis and Gimelstob engaged in a classic big man's battle with both competitors going for winners on seemingly every opportunity.

Gimelstob was treated for a right ankle sprain at 4-4 in the first set, but gamely played on. In the end, though, the powerful Aussie was too much for him, pasting 44 winners, including 16 aces, ending the contest on a service winner.

However, Philippoussis was clearly irritated by the amount of time Gimelstob was taking between points. Moreover, on a changeover, the American took a jab at his foe, saying "How do you like the pace of my serve?"

"I was frustrated and just wanted to get off the court, 23-year-old Philippoussis said. "I should know better by now and learn to stay cool."

Former French Open champion Chang's brief revival was stomped out by Sweden's Mikael Tillstrom, who overpowered his smaller foe 2-6, 6-3, 6-3. Tillstrom used an explosive forehand and rocket re-

turns to subdue the fourth-seeded American, who screamed in anguish late in the third set after a watching one of his numerous floaters buried into the corner for a winner.

"I got tentative," Chang said. "You can't allow your opponent to set up and his those shots. Maybe I was waiting for him to miss rather than making things happen."

Tillstrom said that Chang is a lesser player today than when he was ranked second in the world in 1996.

"He doesn't do much with the ball anymore," Tillstrom said. "At the beginning I was going for my shots too early. Then I decided I wasn't going to lose like that so I became more patient and waited for a chance to hit a powerful shot."

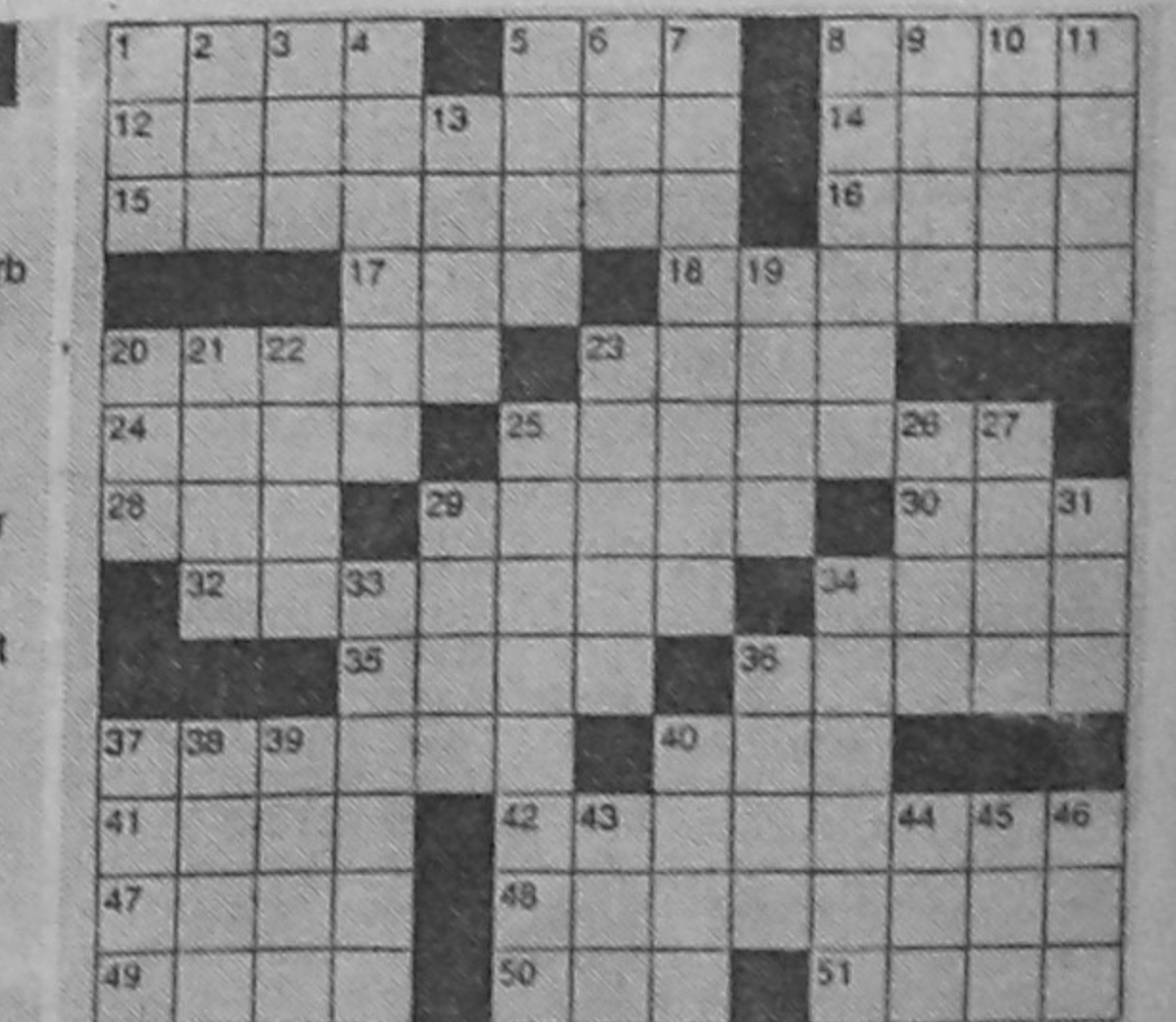
The 27-year-old Tillstrom, who has been on the tour for nine years but has won only one title, said he is playing the best tennis of his life. "I really believe I can beat Wayne," he said. "I feel great about my tennis."

Ferreira got off to a slow start against Swedish giant Magnus Larsson but punished his returns in the last two sets to take the match 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 and reach his first semi-final in 10 months.

"At the beginning, I wasn't serving well and I was hitting short," said Ferreira. "Then I gradually got more depth on my shots and made him play a few more balls."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS		DOWN	
1 Pedestal occupant	37 Illness	2 "Le Coq"	19 Bygone, to Burns
5 Broker's advice	40 Boston jolt	3 Lennon's lady	20 Resort
8 Door-frame part	41 Arab sultanate	4 Greek letter	21 Supergrab
12 Da Vinci master-piece	42 Thru-die	5 Pieces' partners	22 Pinnacle
14 Impressionist	47 Barcelona boy	6 Work after "I"	23 Silly
15 Don King, e.g.	48 Nero Wolfe's creator	7 Gridiron stats	25 BQ
16 "Earth in the Balance" author	49 Teletype tally	8 Move like Jell-O	26 Plonic hamper
17 Encore	50 Banned pesticide	9 "It shouldn't happen to"	27 Bridge
20 Oodles	51 Meta's field	10 Slight dig	29 Darn
23 Muri or Newman	1 Mischio-tyke	11 "Beverly Hills" cast	31 Journalist
24 One of the Three Bears		12 Carrot's companions	33 Ferrante
25 They awaken soldiers		13 Clark's co-worker	34 Does a double-take
26 Gorilla			36 Carrot's companions
28 Won't a Kasparov			37 Stereo alternative
30 Police alert			38 In the thick of
32 Antic-pates			39 Crow's nest cry
34 Coin of 41-Across			40 Livet
35 Black			43 Hankow's outermost band



CRYPTOQUIP

K H X Z P E M P H K R

I X P R P I M N E K J Z M E E X J

E L K E L X R M N E X H X J

E P N X J M Z X H E K R N P H N

Saturday's Cryptogram: ON LUNCH BREAKS HUNGRY COMPUTER PROGRAMMERS TRULY TAKE MEGA-BYTES.

Today's Cryptogram Clue: N equals S

The Cryptogram 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.