

## WA book Mutual Cup final spot

PERTH, Feb 19: Western Australia beat South Australia by 29 runs in the first Mercantile Mutual Cup one-day domestic cricket semifinal at the WACA Ground in Perth on Saturday, reports Reuters.

They will play the winners of the New South Wales-Queensland semifinal on Sunday.

SCORES: Western Australia 246-7 (Simon Katich 116); South Australia 217 (Darren Lehmann 85, Brad Hogg 3-37).

## Rivaldo not worried yet

BARCELONA, Feb 19 (Reuters): Rivaldo insists he is happier than ever at Barcelona despite his disappointing start to the year.

Brazil's 1999 world and European player of the year has scored just three goals since January 1 as Barcelona have slipped to fourth in the Spanish league.

Rivaldo has also clashed with coach Louis van Gaal, who axed him from the team for a couple of games after he complained about playing out on the left wing.

But Rivaldo said he was unconcerned at his poor run in front of goal and believed there was still time to beat his mark of 29 strikes in all competitions for Barca last term.

"This is the happiest I've been at Barcelona," said Rivaldo, who joined them at the start of the 1997-98 season.

"I'm satisfied with the way I'm playing. I always want to score, but it's not something I'm worried about."

"I've scored 15 goals this season, compared to 29 last year. That's a figure I can equal or surpass because there are still enough games left."

"I just need to get into a run of scoring. The important thing is to be happy with yourself and I am happy."

## Bebeto Antlers bound

TOKYO, Feb 19: Brazilian international striker Beбето will join former J-League champions Kashima Antlers when the season kicks off next month, the team announced today, reports Reuters.

Antlers officials said they signed the 36-year-old Beбето to a contract to play from March 2 to next February 1. Financial terms of the deal were not disclosed.

"It goes without saying that Beбето joining our team will have a huge influence on the Antlers this season," the team said in a statement.

Kashima, which won the Japanese crown in 1996 and 1998, has been trying to come back from a disappointing 1999 season.

Former Brazil international Toninho Cerezo was hired as the team's manager last month while the Brazilian pair of Mazinho and Ricardo were given the boot after last season. Playmaker Bismark will stay with the team this season.

Bebeto was in the Brazilian team that won the World Cup in 1994 in the United States.

He remained a firm favourite of national coach Mario Zagallo in France, despite being the subject of heavy criticism from Brazilian fans during the run to the final.

Bebeto has been playing for Mexican club Neza.

## Socceroos call up Bosnich, Kewell

SYDNEY, Feb 19: Australian soccer coach Frank Farina has named Manchester United goalkeeper Mark Bosnich and Leeds star Harry Kewell in the Socceroos squad for a friendly against Hungary in Budapest on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

Farina has also chosen Celtic's Mark Viduka and Rangers pair Tony Vidmar and Craig Moore.

The three Scotland-based players are expected to be available but it is not clear whether Kewell or Bosnich will be cleared by their respective clubs.

Leeds officials have revealed that Kewell has an ankle injury and is doubtful for the trip to Budapest.

## SQUAD

GOALKEEPERS: Mark Bosnich (Manchester United), Zeljko Kalac (Roda JC Kerkrade).

DEFENDERS: Stephen Laybutt (Parramatta), Shaun Murphy (Sheffield United), Craig Moore (Rangers), Tony Vidmar (Rangers), Stan Lazaridis (Birmingham City), Kevin Muscat (Wolverhampton), Lucas Neill (Millwall).

MIDFIELDERS: Steve Corica (Wolverhampton), Josip Skoko (Genk), Danny Tiatto (Manchester City), Richard Johnson (Watford), Craig Foster (Crystal Palace), Paul Okon (Fiorentina).

STRIKERS: Harry Kewell (Leeds), Mark Viduka (Celtic), Paul Agostino (1860 Munich).

## Black baffles Chang

MEMPHIS, Tennessee, Feb 19: Michael Chang blew a 4-0 lead in the first set, and Byron Black took advantage to beat him 7-5, 6-2 Friday night in the quarterfinals of the St. Jude tennis tournament, reports AP.

The 13th-seeded Black, from Zimbabwe, was 0-3 against Chang before Friday night and it looked for a time as if the fifth-seeded Chang would advance in search of his first title since October 1998.

But he fell apart at 4-0, 40-love. Black broke service twice in tying the set at 5-5 when Chang slightly strained his left hamstring. Black broke again to win the first set, and broke twice in the second for a 5-1 lead after Chang stretched out his hamstring with help from a trainer.

## Venus pulls out

OKLAHOMA CITY, Oklahoma, Feb 19: Venus Williams has withdrawn from next week's IGA Super-thrift Tennis Classic because of continuing problems with tendinitis in both wrists, tournament organizers said on Friday, reports Reuters.

The third-ranked Williams has not played since November.

## Highbury too small for Arsenal

LONDON, Feb 19 (Reuters): Ticket demand has far outgrown the capacity at Arsenal's Highbury home and the north London club are now planning a 60,000-capacity stadium to solve the seating crisis.

Faced with a choice of roaring with their footballing brethren inside a new stadium, or queuing despondently outside their traditional stomping ground at Highbury most Arsenal fans have bitten their nostalgic lips and welcomed the proposed move.

"It's a struggle to get tickets at the moment because the capacity is only 38,500. With a bigger stadium you've a better chance of becoming a season-ticket holder," said John Henderson, a Gunners' supporter for more than 30 years, hoped moving from Highbury would shorten the current five-year waiting list for season-tickets, bringing more fans like himself in out of the rain.

His views were echoed by Virgil Kattonen, who at eight-and-a-half months pregnant, hoped to watch Arsenal play Liverpool last weekend provided she was not in labour.

"There doesn't seem to be any other option to the move. But if it means I can get tickets more easily that would be great," said Kattonen.

Draft guidelines for the super-stadium, to be built half a mile away from Highbury, have been published by a local council and are now up for public discussion.

If the council and local residents agree, and Arsenal decide to go ahead with it, the new stadium could be open by 2003 and would give Arsenal one of the largest grounds in the country.

FINANCIAL CAPACITY

For a club that commands a full house at Wembley of more than 70,000 for its European Champions' League matches, Arsenal have been financially stunted by their comparatively small home ground.

In its 1999 annual report, Arsenal Plc said it could sell 60,000 seats regularly their income from the gate would exceed 30 million pounds (47.96 million dollars) a year.

Arsenal need to increase their capacity. At the moment it's 38,500 maximum, that is considerably less than their rivals," said Paul Dimoldenberg, spokesman for the club's relocation project.



Kuwait's Bashar Abdullah (C) shoots the ball during their Asian Cup Group Five qualifier against Nepal in Kuwait City on February 18. The hosts won 5-0. —AFP photo

## Asian Cup finals

# Velappan assures Lebanon



KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 19: Asian Football Confederation (AFC) supremo Peter Velappan today said the Asian Cup finals will be played in Lebanon despite this month's Israeli bombing, reports AFP.

"I want to tell you... this morning, the AFC executive committee chaired by His Royal Highness Sultan Ahmad Shah have categorically declared that the Asian Cup will be hosted by Lebanon in October 2000."

"And there will be no other intention to move the Asian Cup from Lebanon," Velappan, AFC general secretary told reporters.

Lebanese officials immediately hailed the confederation's decision and one described it as a mark of solidarity among AFC members.

There were fears that the Asian Cup finals from October 12 to 29 will be moved from Lebanon due to security concerns following the Israeli bombings.

Velappan said the decision was based on an initiative by the United Nations and the United States for the liberation of Lebanon by Israel by June.

"Everybody thinks that peace will once more return and that the Asian Cup will take place in a complete atmosphere of peace in Lebanon," he said.

Velappan also said today's meeting did not discuss contingency measures, if there were further Israeli bombings.

"We are relieved. We are very happy but I was not surprised by the decision," he said.

Rahif Alameh, secretary-general of the Lebanese Football Association greeted AFC's decision with relief and thanked the confederation for its support.

"We are relieved. We are very happy but I was not surprised by the decision," he said.

Rahif said none of the four football stadiums for the Asian Cup were damaged by the bombings but some power stations were.

The two stadiums in Beirut are ready while the one in Tripoli and one in Saida will be ready by April 15.

The construction cost of all four stadiums is about 115 million dollars, he said.

"We do not feel there is any risk against our football infrastructure," he said.

Security concerns were heightened following Israel's February 8 air raids which wounded 23 civilians and destroyed three power stations.

The Israeli raids followed attacks in Israeli-occupied southern Lebanon by Syrian-backed Hezbollah guerrillas which killed five Israeli soldiers.

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## Ronaldo doesn't talk about transfer

RIO DE JANEIRO, Feb 19: (Reuters/AFP): Inter Milan striker Ronaldo returned Friday to his native Rio de Janeiro but remained tight-lipped over talk of a transfer to the city's biggest club, Flamengo.

Ronaldo has nothing to say about this, his aide, Rodrigo Paiva said. "He has come only to train and to recover. His only worry right now is to resume his career."

Local newspapers were rife with reports this week that Flamengo wanted to lure Ronaldo from Europe after the departure of Romario to Vasco da Gama left the club without a top name.

But Inter would let the former world-player-of-the-year go only for a record transfer fee of 80 million dollars, they reported.

Ronaldo, 23, had an operation on his right knee in November after he was injured in a Serie A match against Lecce. He is tentatively scheduled to begin playing again in April.

Ronaldo will spend 15 days in virtual isolation with his personal therapist Milton Petrone, "Fle", at the Brazilian Soccer Federation's national team training grounds in Teresopolis, 90 kilometres from Rio.

"Here he can sleep and wake up on the soccer field, far from problems and commitments," Paiva said.

His wife, Milene Domingues, seven months pregnant with their first child, stayed behind in Italy.

Sports papers said Ronaldo was five kilograms overweight and would be lined by Inter if he did not shed them quickly.

But Paiva said Ronaldo was just three kilos over his normal weight and would have no trouble losing them in Teresopolis.

ROMARIO'S ADVICE

Meanwhile, Romario was quoted in the press here on Friday as saying Ronaldo would regain his mantle as the world's best player at a faster rate if he played with him at Vasco.

In Friday's Jornal do Brasil, Romario said: "If he (Ronaldo) wants to be the best once more, it would happen more quickly if he played with me at Vasco."

Romario also told Ronaldo's agents, according to the paper, that Rio de Janeiro club Flamengo were rumored to be interested in signing him.

Williams follows

Kournikova

OKLAHOMA CITY, Oklahoma, Feb 19: Venus Williams has withdrawn from next week's IGA Super-thrift Tennis Classic because of continuing problems with tendinitis in both wrists, tournament organizers said on Friday, reports Reuters.

Sa, a 22-year-old Brazilian, beat 11th seed Sargis Sargsian 6-4, 6-4 on Friday for his fourth victory of the week and only the ninth of his career, reaching

the semifinals of the 800,000 dollars ATP Tour event and proving as adept at trading groundstrokes with some of the world's top players as he was at making jump shots.

With his half of the draw losing top seed Mark Philippoussis to injury, and third seed Vince Spadea and sixth seed Jim Courier to upsets, Sa has an unexpected opportunity.

Sa will play 16th seed Magnus Larsson of Sweden in one semifinal and 13th-seeded Zimbabwean Byron Black will play second seed Tommy Haas,

the defending champion, in the other.

Larsson advanced with a 2-6, 7-6, 6-3 win over ninth seed Rainer Schuttler. Black upset fifth seed Michael Chang 7-5, 6-2 and Haas defeated seventh-seeded South African Wayne Ferreira 6-3, 2-6, 6-4.

Sa has advanced by upsetting three seeds — Spadea, 14th seed Richard Fromberg and Sargsian.

"No question I feel great," Sa said. "I feel I played a pretty good match today."

But I've played pretty well since the beginning of the tournament and I'm glad I'm in the semifinals."

Winner of three lower-level Challenger events last year, Sa entered the Memphis tournament hoping only to win a few matches to begin the year on a positive note. Instead, he is an unlikely semifinalist.

"I can honestly say that I didn't expect to be in the semifinals," Sa said. "But I got to a lot of shots in my first-round match (against Ronald Agener) and I got into a rhythm. I'm confident now. I think I can win my next match and get to the finals. I'm feeling good right now. I'm excited."

So is Black, who is enjoying a strong run of his own this week. Black beat US.

Davis Cup hero Chris Woodruff, the fourth seed, in the third round and is in his first semifinal of the year.

Black said he benefited from arriving several days early after being beaten in last week's ATP Tour event in Dubai.

"I had two or three days to get used to the courts and it helped," Black said.

"And I think just getting wins gives you confidence. I haven't had a run like this in a couple of months."

Chang, the former world number two who dropped to 50th last year, said he feels pleased the physical part of his game has returned. He said he lost Friday, as he has on two other occasions this year, because his mental sharpness isn't there.

Chang led 4-0, 40-love in the opening set, but collapsed. Black broke back and won eight of the next nine games.

"I've got to figure out a different mindset," he said. "It's frustrating not only to lose, but to lose in the same way. Once I get my mental toughness back, things will be better for me."

Frenchwoman Anne-Gaëlle Sidot makes a forehand return against Kristie Boogert of the Netherlands at the WTA tournament in Hanover, Germany on February 18. Sidot won 6-4, 6-2. —AFP photo

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# Belgian soccer alive and kicking

BRUSSELS, Feb 19 (Reuters): With Euro 2000 less than four months away, co-host Belgium is enjoying a timely soccer renaissance both on and off the pitch.

The improved fortunes of the national team have coincided with the run-up to what is reckoned to be the world's third biggest sporting event — behind the Olympic Games and soccer's World Cup — to rekindle the game's popularity in this small, soccer-hungry nation of 10 million.

Ground improvements, declining hooliganism, more attractive, open play and even a milder winter have helped win back stay-away fans.

Attendances at First Division games are up by more than 20 percent this season, boosted by signs of a marked change in coaching that preaches more attacking football.

After Norway, the Belgian league boasts the highest average number of goals-per-game, at 3.55.

And Belgium is second only to Scotland with the highest per capita number of fans attending professional matches. So far this season, more than 1.66 million fans have passed through the turnstiles, over 300,000 more than last season.

Season ticket sales are a roaring success. Last season's champions Genk have sold 17,500 annual passes, with a stadium capacity of only 12,500. Anderlecht have 16,620 season ticket holders. Club Bruges nearly 12,000.

The average First Division attendance has jumped to a 20-year high of 9,600, small beer against crowds in England, Italy, Spain or Germany, but a healthy rise on recent years.

Hosting Euro 2000 has had its spin-offs with ground improvements offering fans better

views, more comfort, tighter security and seat prices on a par with a trip to the cinema.

Clubs have won back businessmen to corporate boxes and are wooing women and families with free entry at some grounds.

At international level, Belgium are on a roll. Coach Robert Waseige has encouraged his players to show more flair and

seven point lead over Standard Liege, their great rivals from the 1970s and 1980s and themselves on a strong post-war run.

With a third of the season to go, seven clubs have a chance of grabbing one of two European places next season — all of which has given a new buzz to the domestic game.

Daily Le Soir trumpeted the revival with a front-page splash on Thursday. "There's no doubt, Belgian soccer is on the up. Week by week, all the signals are turning to green."

The revival has its coast, however.

Scouts from the bigger national leagues have wanted their cheque books and several fans' favourites have been exported.

Branko Strupar and Cedric Roussel have joined Gilles De Bilde in the English Premier League, moving to Derby County and Coventry City, while the Mpenza brothers, Emile and Mbo, have gone into exile in Germany and Portugal.

Ghanaian striker Souleymane Oulare, 1998/99 player-of-the-year and one of the league's hottest properties, has also moved on, quitting Genk to join Turkey's Fenerbahce early in the season.

However, the revival cannot hide the yawning gap between soccer's elite, which demands multi-million dollar broadcast rights, and poor.

This has prompted fresh talk of Anderlecht, Bruges and maybe Standard joining a breakaway competition with clubs from the Netherlands, Portugal, Scotland and Scandinavia, although this would be unlikely to usurp the current national set up.

Another option still touted around is for a so-called BeNediga, effectively merging the Euro 2000 hosts' leagues.

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