

Sport

Luxemburgo at full strength

SAO PAULO, Apr 24: Brazil coach Wanderley Luxemburgo on Sunday enjoyed a full house of players for their 2002 World Cup qualifier against Ecuador in Sao Paulo although many clubs had protested at releasing players, reports AFP.

Flamengo, for example, who play Vasco Da Gama Basque on Sunday in a match which could decide the Rio de Janeiro championship, had threatened not to release defender Athirson, creating friction between the club and Brazilian football federation (CBF).

Athirson arrived however at the team hotel and said he delighted he was to be in the Brazilian squad for Wednesday's match. "I really wanted to play for Flamengo this Sunday but I was lucky because the club understood my situation and authorized my release."

The only tense moment came when Ronaldinho Gaucho of the Union club arrived an hour after the 1100 (1400 GMT) deadline for the players to meet at the team hotel.

An agitated Ronaldinho said his plane had made an unscheduled stop and was therefore delayed. "Right now I am looking forward to playing for the Brazilian team but I will be thinking of my club on Sunday," Ronaldinho said.

Luxemburgo arrived shortly before the 1100 (1400 GMT) deadline and made no comments to the press before going to his hotel room. On Sunday afternoon, Luxemburgo has a training session scheduled at Pacaembu.

Meanwhile, Ecuador coach Hernan Dario Gomez said he had a dream of beating Brazil 1-0. Quito newspaper Hoy said.

Colombian Gomez, who was due to travel to Sao Paulo on Sunday, added his squad was in good spirits.

"We all know Brazil is a wonderful side but we are going there with great belief in ourselves. The other day I dreamed that we won 1-0 through a goal by Ulises (de la Cruz)," Gomez said.

Rangers riding high

GLASGOW, Apr 24: Rangers celebrated winning the title in style on Sunday by beating St Johnstone 2-0 at McDiarmid Park, reports AFP.

Scotland striker Billy Dodds, in action against Holland for his country this Wednesday, led the way with goals after 43 and 60 minutes to seal the victory.

Rangers have been unbeaten on their travels in the league this season, their only defeat at home to Dundee and soon as the deadlock was broken Saints' challenge folded.

Celtic's 1-1 draw with Hibernian at Parkhead on Saturday confirmed Rangers as Champions without kicking a ball -- leading to an inevitable sense of anti-climax.

Yet there was no disguising the joy at the end as Rangers skipper Lorenzo Amoruso led the players onto the field for a champagne-fuelled lap of honour for the 7,000-plus visiting supporters.

It is a second successive title success for Rangers manager Dick Advocaat, who has transformed the Ibrox club since his arrival from PSV Eindhoven lifting them an emphatic 20 points clear of Celtic.

Advocaat would not single out any particular player for credit, hailing the team effort throughout the season.

The Dutchman said: "Everybody is a very good player. I do not like to talk about stars."

He added: "It's always great when you get the championship. We worked very hard to get it but it was well deserved as well."

"It was a long season. We had a very good period but if you only lose one game in a season you have to say you did an excellent job."

"St Johnstone looked very sharp but in the second half we played some excellent football and it was just a case of how many goals we would score."

"If you do not have the right commitment then you can get some problems. St Johnstone were quite physical -- but I did not think we gave them a chance."

Garbin grabs Budapest Open

BUDAPEST, April 24: Unseeded Tatjana Garbin of Italy defeated Kristie Boogert of the Netherlands to secure her first career title in the 100,000 dollars Budapest Ladies Open clay court tournament Sunday, reports AP.

Garbin downed the 7th-seeded Boogert 6-2, 7-6 (7-4) in just 79 minutes.

The 77th WTA-ranked Italian started confidently and with strong baseline shots, broke service as early as the second game.

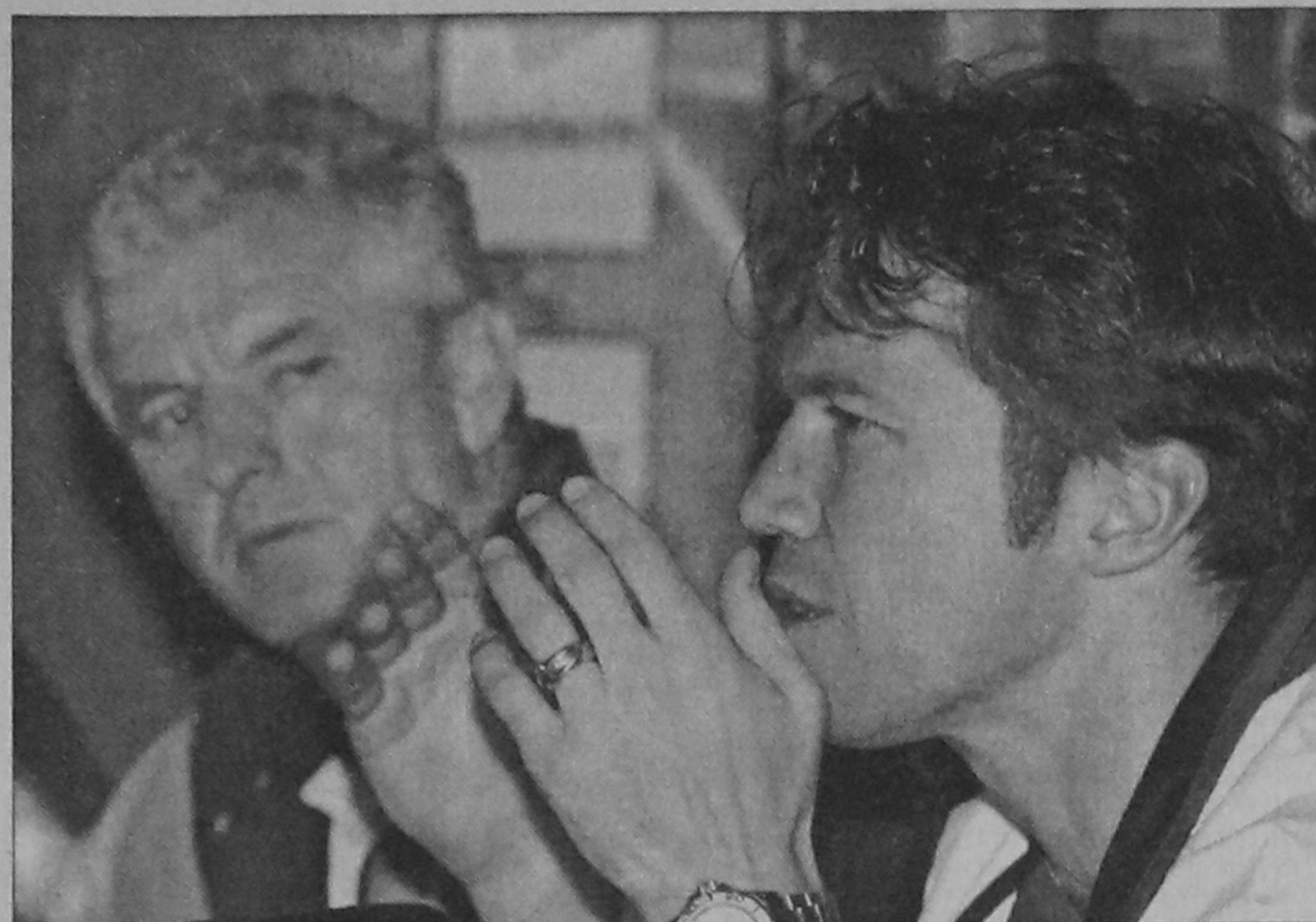
"We are disappointed that certain players were not here at the start of the week," Dominguez told a press conference before Sunday's final between Frenchman Cedric Pioline and Dominik Hrbaty of the Slovak Republic.

"In future, we will have to deal with the ATP in order to guarantee the presence of all the players."

"We will meet in Rome with the other tournament directors and we will ask the ATP Tour to be more persuasive as to the participation of the players."

"There are no words to express how happy I am," she said after the match.

Garbin received 16,000 and 90 WTA points for the championship.



German soccer legend Lothar Matthaeus (R) talking to the newsmen during a conference in Saarland, Germany yesterday while national coach Erich Ribbeck looks on. Germany play Switzerland in a friendly match in Kaiserslautern today.

—AFP photo

Pierce blows Arantxa away



HILTON HEAD ISLAND, South Carolina, April 24: Top seed Mary Pierce blitzed fourth-seeded

Arantxa Sanchez Vicario 6-1, 6-0 to win the 166,000 dollars first prize in the women's tennis tournament at Hilton Head Island yesterday, reports Reuters.

Pierce matched one of the tournament's older records, the one game Chris Evert gave up to Billie Jean King in the 1977 final. The Frenchwoman lost just 12 games in five matches here, shattering Evert's record of 15 games in 1985.

Pierce needed 56 minutes in the final, 12 minutes more than she required to defeat Monica Seles in the semifinals.

Seles said she had never seen Pierce serve better than she served in the semifinals. Sanchez Vicario said she had never seen Pierce play so well for an entire week.

The 25-year-old Pierce put on a groundstroke and serving clinic at Sea Pines Racquet Club. She nailed 27 winners to just five for Sanchez Vicario. Pierce had 15 unforced errors, enough to give the Spaniard a couple of openings that Pierce quickly closed.

Sanchez Vicario had one real chance to make a match of it, in the fourth game.

The gritty Spaniard had closed to 24 on an amazing show of energy when she ran down what looked like a sure winner off a Pierce forehand.

MARY PIERCE

—AP photo

Pierce recovered to guess right on a Pierce overhead and finally picked off a Pierce drop shot to win a break point, before sliding down to the clay to avoid running into one of the green sofas on the side of the court.

Pierce clapped to compliment her opponent for the display of hustle, then went about her job.

Sanchez-Vicario kept the heat on by gaining an advantage on her serve in the fourth game, but then lost the ad on an error. Another deuce later, Pierce drilled back-to-back forehand winners to take a 3-1 lead, and never looked back.

"That was a very, very big game at 2-1 for me to go up 3-1.

Pierce said, "It was very good that I won that game because if it's 2-2, things change. It's a big difference between 3-1 and 2-2 in the first set."

Pierce breezed in the second set, winning 12 straight points in one stretch to move to 30-love in the sixth game.

"I've just become more and more relaxed on the court and just really at peace with everything," said Pierce, who is engaged to be married to Cleveland Indians baseball star Roberto Alomar.

Sanchez-Vicario tried to move her opponent from side to side, but eventually would angle a backhand too sharply for an error or would wind up watching a Pierce forehand smack a line for a winner.

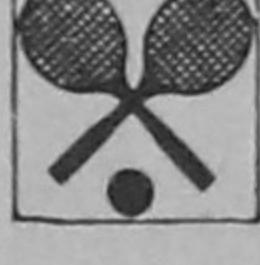
"I tried to move her around, but she played very, very well," Sanchez-Vicario said. "She's a very powerful player. She hits the ball really hard and she especially served really well today. Normally her second serve you can attack a little bit more, but today she was just making aces and making the point really well."

Other than her big forehands and well-placed backhands, Pierce used her powerful serve as a key weapon all week. No one found an answer.

"The first set was probably much closer than it shows," Sanchez Vicario said. "But I think that once Mary was ahead, she just went on a roll and she didn't miss much. She was playing really very deep and very consistent."

Monte Carlo Open Masters Series

Top guns annoy organiser



MONTRE CARLO, Apr 24: Tennis stars Pete Sampras and Pat Rafter were among absentees slammed as "black

sheep" by tournament director Patrice Dominguez for declining to play in the Monte Carlo Open Masters Series event, reports AFP.

Leading players including Americans Sampras, Andre Agassi and Todd Martin, Australians Rafter and Lleyton Hewitt and German star Nicolas Kiefer all bypassed the third of nine Masters Series events to be played this year.

Fed Cup tennis

Japan, Thailand in same group

OSAKA, Japan, April 24: Top favourites Japan, led by Ai Sugiyama, were drawn in the same pool as Thailand in the preliminary round robin of the Fed Cup tennis Asia Oceania Group One, which starts here Tuesday, reports AFP.

Eleven countries were divided into two pools. The top-seeded teams from each pool will compete in a playoff on Sunday for a place in the World Group next season.

Top-seeded Japan will take on fourth-seeded Thailand, led by Tamarine Tanasugarn, India, Hong Kong and Kazakhstan in the five-team Pool A on the outdoor hard courts at the Utsube Tennis Centre.

Li Fang and Yi Jingqian spearhead second-seeded China's challenge in Pool B. They face third-seeded Taiwan, led by Wang Shiting and Janet Lee, Singapore, Indonesia, New Zealand and South Korea.

Japanese team captain Takeshi Koura expressed relief at having avoided China, Taiwan and Indonesia.

"It would have been tough to play them, but all of them were drawn in the other pool. Tamarine Tanasugarn is our only big rival. My players have never lost to other Thai players."

"If we can move into top gear towards Saturday and Sunday, I'm sure we will win. Hopefully, we can start the 21st century in the World Group," Koura added.

The country to come last in the two pools will be relegated to Group Two next year.

In Group Two this year, Uzbekistan were seeded top against Iraq, Malaysia, Pacific Oceania and Fiji in pool A, while the Philippines were seeded second against Sri Lanka, Syria, Jordan, Tajikistan and Pakistan in Pool B.

The top two teams from each pool will advance to a playoff round and two countries will be promoted to Group One.

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Hewitt, Martin and Sampras all presented medical certificates prior to their withdrawals.

Sampras, though, had earlier said he did not plan to play in Monte Carlo.

Dominguez, a former French Davis Cup player, said men's tennis still has to resolve several problems with its calendar, but said he expected Masters Series events to be held over eight or nine days -- instead of the current seven -- in the near future.

The Masters Series events should last one or two days more in order to organise a recuperation day or two for the

players," he said.

"Maybe the other tournaments, the weeks before, should stop on Friday or Saturday in order for the players to have a day's rest."

Piole and Hrbaty had to play six singles matches in seven days here as the Masters Series events have 64 players in the singles draw. Players in Grand Slam events play up to seven singles matches -- but over a two-week period.

"I think by the year 2002 or 2003 we will have a more balanced calendar -- and that will be in interests of the players, but also the spectators and the media," Dominguez said.

He added that he understood it would be difficult to axe some of the smaller events from the schedule, but said it needs to be done.

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