

Norman in ignominy

AP, Rome

Magnus Norman arrived as Italian Open defending champion feeling a bit down on himself.

But the 24-year-old Swede sank even deeper, losing his first round match in Rome in straight sets to Vincenzo Santopadre, the ATP's 180th ranked player.

"Nothing seems to be going my way," said Norman on Monday, after yet another early exit. "I'm going a terrible period. I don't know how to come out of this situation. I'm devastated."

It was the fifth straight tournament in which the Swede has not managed to get past the second round.

The courts at the Foro Italico court darkened under thick clouds, and the red clay dampened under hard rains. But it was an especially dreary day for Norman, who only a year ago collected his biggest tournament win on the same Centre Court.

Norman, the No. 5 seed, suffered another bruising to his confidence, falling 6-4, 6-3 to Santopadre, an Italian wildcard entry.

With the sun out Tuesday, play began early with Russia's Yevgeny Kafelnikov advancing in his first-round match when Romania's Andrei Pavel withdrew in the second set with back problems.

Kafelnikov was leading 7-5, 3-1, when Pavel pulled out.

On Monday, Norman didn't attribute the loss to the solid play of Santopadre, who fired 24 winners, including well-disguised drop shots that left the Swede charging at second or third

ounces. "It was all me," Norman said minutes after sending an easy backhand wide on match point, the last of his 30 unforced errors.

"I played one of the worst matches of my career. "Were there any physical or technical problems?" No, it's all in my head. I don't know what to do. I'm playing very well in practice but when I step on the court and see the umpire, I get very tight and can't move my feet."

The precise play which won him last year's tournament and brought him to the French Open finals has lagged in recent months.

"This is one of the worst moments of my career," he concluded.

Santopadre won the only other head-to-head showdown with Norman in a 1998 match on clay in Bournemouth, England.

"I knew I had to keep him from playing his game," said the 30-year-old Italian. "Otherwise, he can be deadly."

But after reaching the finals of the Sydney tournament in January, Norman has let his opponents get the better of him.

Last year, Norman was on top of his game in Rome, beating Brazil's Gustavo Kuerten in four sets in the final of the annual Foro Italico affair, and moving to the top of the ATP rankings.

Akhtar

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his third over by cutting one back to bowl Steve Titchard for 11 and reduce Derbyshire to 44 for two.

Sutton was next to go after batting for an hour and a half when he was caught by Imran Farhat off spinner Saqlain Mushtaq for 26.

Matthew Dowman struck six boundaries as he and Stephen Basson held firm until lunch and added another following the restart before Akhtar dismissed him for 36.

Cork had to jab down hurriedly on the next delivery as the 'Rawalpindi Express' picked up speed, but Basson had no answer as he was trapped in front for 17.

Worse was to come for Derbyshire as wicketkeeper Rashid Latif accepted a thin edge from the bowling of Saqlain to remove Karl Krikken for a duck before the umpires decided the light was not good enough to continue.

SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard on the first day of the three-day tour match between Derbyshire and Pakistan Tuesday: DERBYSHIRE: First Innings

L Sutton c Farhat b Saqlain 26

S Stublings c Inzamam b Waqar 8

S Titchard b Razzaq 11

M Dowman b Akhtar 36

C Bassano lbw b Akhtar 17

D Cork lbw b Saqlain 27

K Krikken c Laish b Saqlain 0

N Dumelow c Farhat b Saqlain 6

T Smith not out 6

T Lumbrey b Saqlain 0

L Wharton not out 0

Extras: (b-5, lb-10, nb-6) 21

Total: (For 9 wkt/s in 58.1 overs) 158

Fall of wickets: 1-17, 2-44, 3-62,

4-103, 5-108, 6-115, 7-131, 8-158, 9-158

Bowler O M R W

Waqar 6.1 1 17 1

Akhtar 12 0 31 2

Razzaq 11 2 36 1

Mahmood 7 1 21 0

Saqlain 21 9 34 5

Farhat 1 0 4 0

PAKISTAN: Mohammad Wasim,

Salim Elahi, Faisal Iqbal, Inzamamul Haq, Yousef Youhana, Rashid Latif, Waqar Younis (captain), Shoaib Akhtar, Abdur Razzaq, Saqlain Mushtaq, Azhar Mahmood.

Umpires: A Clarkson and P Willey.

Afghans break new ground

Cricket

AP, Torkham

War-weary Afghanistan sent its first cricket team on its first tour Tuesday.

But getting to Pakistan wasn't easy.

The cricketers had to push and shove their way to the giant steel gates that separates the two countries.

They waded through hundreds of their fellow countrymen, who were trying to get to Pakistan to escape a devastating drought and a bitter and protracted civil war.

The team arrived wearing the traditional shalwar kameez, baggy pants and a long tunic, sporting shorts - demanded by the ruling Taliban - and wearing the flowing turban, also required attire by the ruling militia.

And they were ready to play cricket.

"We are a good team. This is our first tour and we will show that our players are talented," said Allah Dad Noori, team captain.

Cricket came only recently to Afghanistan, brought there by refugees returning home from

cricket-crazy Pakistan.

Two former Pakistani Test cricketers, Farukh Zaman, who also is an international cricket referee, and Rehmat Gul welcomed the young team on its first tour.

At the request of the International Cricket Council Zaman last year spent several weeks coaching Afghan cricketers.

As well the Afghan team is seeking international cricket membership, along with Brunei, Maldives, South Korea and Bahrain, said Noori.

The ICC, which is giving equipment to the impoverished Afghan team, will be sending delegation to the war-battered nation within the next one year before deciding on Afghanistan's membership request, he said.

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But officials who say it distracts the young from prayer.

But not cricket, says Noori.

"The Taliban have recognised cricket as a sport. We have no problem with the Taliban, rather they are encouraging us," he said.

There are only two cricket pitches in the war-shattered Afghan capital of Kabul. Last year Pakistan donated a roller to make new pitches, said Noori.

"There is wrong impression that the Taliban have banned sports," said Maulvi Abdul Rehman, vice-president of Afghanistan's Olympic Committee.

"We are encouraging the healthy activities but in accordance with our religion and traditions."

The tour, which is a club level tour, will include matches in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's North-West frontier Province that borders Afghanistan and Rawalpindi, which neighbours the federal capital of Islamabad.

"Right now the Afghan team is at the club level," said Zaman.

But with practice and equipment, Noori said his team could be world class.

"Given the opportunity we could play in the cricket World Cup and win," he said.

Gloucs given home draw

Cricket

AP, London

Benson and Hedges cup holders Gloucestershire — who cemented their quarterfinal berth at the weekend — were handed a home tie with Durham after Sunday's matches were completed.

Somerset will take on Yorkshire, while Sussex meet Surrey and Nottinghamshire are due to play Warwickshire. One of the matches will take place on May 22, with the other three going ahead the following day.

The fourth tie sees Nottinghamshire host Warwickshire.

Everyone went home happy at Headingly as Yorkshire and Durham both qualified, with the hosts prevailing by 30 runs.

Durham did enough in defeat — 227 for four in reply to 257 for seven — to edge out Leicestershire from the northern section.

Yorkshire had the batting of Darren Lehmann and Anthony McGrath to thank for pushing their run rate up sufficiently to reach the quarter-finals by that

of victory.

Stephen Fleming made 73 for the visitors but received precious little support as the Essex attack shared the wickets around. Tim Mason finished with three for 40 while Ronnie Irani, Andrew McGarry and gold award winner Paul Grayson all took two apiece.

At West End, qualifiers Sussex piled on the misery for Hampshire, winning by 60 runs.

At Canterbury, Kent won a high-scoring game with Surrey by one run.

Kent won the toss and totalled 265 for nine, with wicketkeeper Paul Nixon (65 not out), James Hockley (55) and Robert Key (45) did the damage, with the latter putting on 102 for the second wicket.

Alec Stewart top-scored with 92 for Surrey, while other decent contributions — most notably from Ben Hollioake (50 not out) and Robert Key (45) did the damage, with the latter putting on 102 for the second wicket.

In the battle of the bottom two, Northamptonshire beat winless Glamorgan by eight wickets at Cardif.

At Taunton, Somerset set up the home clash with Yorkshire by beating neighbours Gloucestershire by 108 runs at Taunton.

In the Southern Division, Essex beat Middlesex by 71 runs at Chelmsford.

Essex won the toss and chose to bat, amassing 232 from their 50 overs. England captain Nasser

At B & H CUP DRAW

English Benson and Hedges one-day cricket cup draw on Monday: Gloucestershire v Durham

Sussex v Surrey

Somerset v Yorkshire

Nottinghamshire v Warwickshire

Matches to be played on May 22 and 23.

Cantona in Thailand

Football

AP, Bangkok

French beach football captain and former Manchester United star Eric Cantona arrived Monday in Thailand, where he will play in a gala beachfront match later this week.

Welcomed by applause from fans and local reporters at Bangkok's Oriental Hotel, Cantona said he was overjoyed at the "strong reception".

"I didn't see any Liverpool supporters," he joked.

Cantona, 34, recently crowned the best player in Manchester United history, has become one of the principal ambassadors of beach football, a sport that could be included in the 2008 Olympic Games.

"I hope that everyone who comes together to support the sport (beach football) leaves enthralled because it's a very spectacular sport," he said at a press conference.

Cantona is in Thailand "for the promotion of beach soccer in a country, a continent where I think the sport could perhaps be developed".

The focus of Cantona's visit is

to gather with a "French selection", including Pascal Metzger, Vincent Guérin and his brother Joel, in a match against "a beautiful team from Thailand" at a Bangkok sports complex Saturday night.

But before taking to the beach for the game, Cantona will spend a few days visiting another beach at the seaside resort of Pattaya, south of Bangkok.

Those are deeply passionate about football and are particularly captivated by the English Premier League, which is widely covered

on local television.

In Bangkok and Singapore, as much as in Liverpool and Manchester, young fans wear their favourite team's jersey like a second skin.

Some shops in Bangkok specialise almost exclusively in British football paraphernalia and souvenirs, including jerseys, videos and posters.

All the British teams that have enthralled Asian fans, it has been Manchester United that has capitalised most on the lucrative football industry in the region.

Brother and manager Steve

Rafer said his brother hadn't elaborated on his long-term future in the game and didn't want to be drawn on whether he would stick to his word and retire at the end of the year.

"He's just a year-by-year proposition at this stage," Rafer said.

"At the end of the year he'll assess it. As a family we don't talk to him about it, we let the likes of Roche (Tony Roche) and Newk (John Newcombe) talk to him."

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