



PHOTO: AFP
Kim Clijsters of Belgium in action against Daniela Hantuchova of Slovakia in the fourth round of the Australian Open in Melbourne on Sunday.

SHARAPOVA SAILS

Martina, Kim to face off

Australian Open

The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

INTERNET, undated

Martina Hingis' year-long wait to even with Kim Clijsters will soon come to an end.

The sixth-seeded Hingis is headed for her second consecutive quarterfinal showdown with no. 4 Clijsters at the Australian Open after both posted fourth-round victories on Monday.

A three-time winner (1997-1999), Hingis dropped her first set of this year's tournament before rallying for a 4-6, 6-3, 6-0 triumph over China's Na Li in their first career meeting.

"Everyone else knows by now she serves almost 100 percent (of her) first serves," Hingis said. "(She) didn't really give me too many chances to do something. I was thinking, 'if she can continue to play like that, it's too good.' I just tried to hang in there. That was the

most important thing."

The Swiss superstar took advantage of Li's 69 unforced errors to reach the quarterfinals for the ninth time in 10 appearances. In addition to her three titles, Hingis also is a three-time runner-up (2000-2002).

Clijsters defeated Slovakia's Daniela Hantuchova for the ninth time in as many meetings with a 6-1, 7-5 victory. The Belgian has won all but one set in the rivalry, losing that set at Flushing in 2002.

"I know I have to come out 100 per cent and (be) ready from the beginning," Hingis said. "Otherwise I'll be run over. That's the key. I have a day (of) rest tomorrow. Just practice, sleep well (and) give myself the best shot."

Clijsters has won the last three showdowns with Hingis to level their head-to-head record for 4-4, including a victory at last year's French open quarterfinals.

"We always have a lot of fun points when you play against Martina," Clijsters said. "She always comes up with some unbelievable shots that you don't expect."

"Sometimes when you play a player, you kind of get used to their routine. You know kind of when they're going to play down the line (or) cross-court. With her, you always have to be ready to go the other way."

No. 12 Anna Chakvetadze of Russia evened her career series against eighth-seeded patty

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Amelie Mauresmo of France with a right ankle sprain.

Gunners fire stuns Fergie

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson admitted he was shocked that Manchester United allowed Arsenal to blow the Premiership title race wide open with their 2-1 win at the Emirates Stadium here on Sunday.

Ferguson's side led 1-0 at Arsenal on Sunday with just seven minutes to play after Wayne Rooney's 53rd minute header.

But, with United looking set to extend their lead over second placed Chelsea to nine points, Arsenal staged a late fightback to snatch the points and give Jose Mourinho's side fresh hope of retaining their crown.

Robin van Persie equalised in the 83rd minute and then, as United tried to hold on for a point, Thierry Henry found space in the penalty area to bury an injury time header past Edwin van der Sar and seal a dramatic 2-1 victory.

The defeat was cruel on United, who remain six points ahead of Chelsea, and Ferguson revealed

he could not see how Arsenal would get back into the match.

"We're disappointed," he told Sky Sports. "I need to really analyse how we lost the goals."

"There wasn't a moment in the game I worried about. The position we were in, we defended well and they resorted to long balls to be honest with you."

"We were coping with that great and I couldn't see anything that was going to disturb us. I took Henrik (Larsson) off for the last nine minutes or so, tried to get a change with Louis (Saha) pace up front and we've lost two goals from positions where I didn't think we'd lose goals. But that's football."

The defeat was United's first in seven matches since they lost 1-0 at West Ham in December, but Ferguson's only complaint was that his side had sat back after taking the lead.

"These games are always difficult," he said. "You can't say you are going to dominate a game for 90 minutes."

"I felt we started a bit nervous. United were mature and they played with great belief. We are on the way up and we knew it in the

SEE PAGE 18 COL 7

Domenech voices Platini support

Football

AFP, Tignes

France manager Raymond Domenech has backed Michel Platini over Lennart Johansson to become the new president of European football's governing body UEFA.

"It's important that Michel Platini is elected UEFA president. If he's not elected it'll be a loss for football because he has a European vision of the game," Domenech said on Sunday.

The boss of Les Bleus spelled out why he believed Platini was the man to run the game in Europe.

"He has ideas for everyone. Some (countries) have lots of money, others none at all. It wouldn't be good in the medium term if football only existed in three or four countries with the financial means.

"We need to develop football across the board and the game has to come first."

"We have to give certain countries the chance to show that they're capable of challenging the big powers."

With 51-year-old French legend Platini boasting impeccable credentials as one of the top footballers of his generation Domenech added: "I ask myself how is it possible that a former high class player hasn't been elected president before now."

"After all it's the players who make football, who can provide the drive and who have a long-term vision."

"Michel won't be spending his time in administration. The objective

has to be football and how it's going to develop."

While this is former France captain and coach Platini's first stab at running UEFA, the 77-year-old Johansson is going for his fifth successive term as president.

The election for the top job in European football involving all 52 national football associations that are members of the European Football Union is scheduled for January 26 in Dusseldorf.

Injury blow for Van Persie

AFP, London

Real Madrid's Spanish midfielder Jose Antonio Reyes (L) is chased by ecstatic teammate Ivan Helguera (C) and Mahamadou Diarra after he scored against Mallorca in their Primera Liga match at the Ono Stadium in Mallorca on Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP

BARCA 'WINTER CHAMPIONS' Real ride on Reyes

AFP, Madrid

A brilliant free-kick from Jose Antonio Reyes pushed all talk of crisis into the background Sunday as Real Madrid joined Barcelona and Sevilla at the Spanish league summit following a 1-0 win at Real Mallorca.

The manner of the win was workmanlike at best, but Reyes' superb strike 13 minutes from time from a freekick awarded after Fernando Navarro had fouled the former Arsenal man, deserved to win any match.

The three points hauled Real onto 38 points from 19 games - the

midway point of the season, although Barcelona have a game in hand and a superior goal difference having swamped Gimnastic Tarragona 3-0 at the Nou Camp.

Sevilla drew 0-0 at Villarreal on Saturday to make it three games without a win for the southerners even if they still share the leadership.

Real achieved their win in the continued absence of unwanted stars David Beckham and Ronald

- the former having agreed to join Los Angeles Galaxy in the summer, if not before, and the latter believed to be on his way to AC Milan.

Striker Raul, one of a dwindling band of pre-BECKHAM era stars, missed Sunday's win with injury but despite several minor scares Real came through the evening relatively untroubled.

"Today was a massive win," said Real's sporting director Pedja Mijatovic.

"I think we can play better but I'm happy."

Pressed on the future of the club's discarded galacticos he told Canal Plus television: "Now is not the time to speak about such things!"

Ruud Van Nistelrooy and newcomer Higuain missed yesterday

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2

Sharapova calls for spice

Australian Open

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AFP, Melbourne

Tennis glamour girl Maria Sharapova criticised her male counterparts for their boring fashion sense Monday, urging them to "spice it up" when they take to the court.

The 19-year-old Russian, who set last year's Australian Open abuzz by wearing a powder-blue baby-doll nightie, made the call after advancing to the season-opening Grand Slam's quarter-final for the third consecutive year.

"I do think that men's fashion is a little boring on the tennis court," she said.

"I'd like to see them spice it up. You can't do white on white, that's just too boring."

But Sharapova, whose Aussie Open run has seen her re-installed as world number one, had a word of warning for the men -- don't try to revive the 1970s-style "short shorts" that predominated in the days of chunky medallions and big moustaches.

Sharapova admitted she liked neither the crotch-hugging super-short look or the slacker-style long shorts, some extending beyond the knee, worn by a handful of modern players such as Rafael Nadal.

"I don't have a preference," she said. "I don't know, that's a tough one. I don't like the long, I think we've got to keep some tradition in tennis, but the shorter they are the worse it is as well."

Sharapova has ditched the baby-doll at this year's tournament in favour of a high-waisted lemon and white chiffon number with an orchid embroidered on the thigh.

Thierry Henry has always had a flair for the dramatic and the Arsenal striker picked the perfect time to make a decisive intervention in the title race.

With United holding on for a draw at Arsenal that would have extended their lead over Chelsea to seven points, it was Henry who rose to the occasion with a last minute winner on Sunday that gave Jose Mourinho's team renewed hope of retaining their title.

But Arsenal refused to accept their fate as mere bystanders in United's title charge.

Just as Mourinho and the Chelsea faithful must have been

preparing to concede defeat in the title race, van Persie came on to draw Arsenal level in the 83rd minute.

Cesc Fabregas whipped in a cross and Henry dummied to van Persie, who arrived at the far post to turn his shot past van der Sar.

That would have been enough for Chelsea to believe they still had a chance of catching United, so when Henry bulletted his header home deep into injury time, it wasn't just the Emirates Stadium that went wild.

It's safe to say the celebrations in north London as Arsenal completed a memorable double over United were mirrored across the capital at Stamford Bridge.

Chelsea are hardly looking like convincing challengers at present as they struggle to cope with the fall-out from Mourinho's row with the club's owner Roman Abramovich over transfer policy.

But Arsenal's late heroics at least give Chelsea a glimmer of hope that they can recover to land a third successive league crown.

For United a first defeat in seven matches was cruel after they had dominated possession for long periods.

A draw would have been a fairer result but Ferguson will be concerned at this side's failure to close out a match that was there for the taking.

Arsenal, who had won 1-0 at Old Trafford earlier in the season, are still 12 points behind United and, while a late season title challenge is unlikely, this result gives further proof that Wenger's claim his side are still a force in the Premiership is not to be easily ignored.

For much of the day it looked as though Rooney would be the hero.

The United striker arrived at the Emirates Stadium without a goal in seven matches and with just one in his previous 13 matches.

He was asked to occupy a role on the left wing early on and, as a player who thrives at the centre of the attack, he found it hard to impose himself from the flanks.

He couldn't be subdued for long though and took centre-stage after 53 minutes.

Cristiano Ronaldo's pass sent Evra away down the left and the United full-back curled over a cross to Rooney, who escaped the attentions of Gael Clichy and directed a superb header past Jens Lehmann and into the far corner.

But it was Henry who had the last word as he took the chance to prove he is as much a man for the big occasion as Rooney.



Arsenal's mercurial striker Thierry Henry (R) heads the ball in between Manchester United defenders Nemanja Vidic (C) and Rio Ferdinand (2ndR) for a last minute winner in their crucial Premiership encounter at The Emirates Stadium on Sunday.