



A dejected Rafael Nadal leaves the court after losing his match against Mikhail Youzhny at the Dubai Open on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Passarella given community service

AFP, Buenos Aires

River Plate coach Daniel Passarella has been handed 27 months of community service after being convicted of the illegal importing of a yacht, judiciary sources said Thursday.

Passarella, a former Argentina coach and player, will have to spend six hours a week over two years and three months working for free in a public school in the capital Buenos Aires.

The World Cup winner was found guilty of contraband having declared in 1997 a value of 70,000 dollars and submitted falsified documents when bringing into the country a yacht he bought in the United States for around 160,000 dollars.

Ramos demands serious action

AFP, Madrid

Sevilla coach Juande Ramos said Friday that he was still in shock two days after being knocked unconscious by a bottle thrown from the crowd during a Spanish King's Cup quarterfinal against Real Betis.

"I'm still in shock and I'm trying to get over it. The match was heated but I never could imagine that something like that could happen," he told radio Cadena Ser.

"I don't remember anything after being struck, nor what happened on the pitch," he added.

Ramos was hit by the bottle of water at Betis' Manuel Ruiz de Lopera stadium after Sevilla had taken a 1-0 lead on a 56th-minute goal by Frederic Kanoute.

He stumbled on the pitch before falling to the ground and was then carried off on a stretcher but regained consciousness minutes later although the game was called off.

Ramos attended his team's training session on Thursday morning after spending the night under observation.

The Spanish football federation's competition committee is expected to announce any punishments Friday. The Spanish media have suggested that Betis' stadium could be closed for 12 matches.

Bento dead

AFP, Lisbon

Former Portugal goalkeeper Manuel Galrinho Bento, whose international career stretched from 1972 to 1992, died in hospital here on Thursday, local media reported.

Bento won 63 caps and "was considered one of the best goalkeepers in the history of Portuguese football", said sports daily A Bola.

Bento played in the 1986 World Cup and the 1984 European championships where Portugal were beaten in the semifinals by France. He also won eight league titles with Benfica.

He was last seen in public on Wednesday at a party to celebrate Benfica's 103rd anniversary.

The cause of Bento's death was not revealed.

Inter not wavering

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan's record run of 17 consecutive league wins came to an end in midweek, but with a 14-point lead at the top of the table, the runaway Serie A leaders are not panicking.

Their march towards the title was interrupted by a 1-1 draw at home to Udinese on Wednesday, but second-placed Roma failed to exploit a rare slip-up by the champions after their 2-2 draw at Chievo.

"We're not going to make a drama out of this after 17 consecutive victories," said Inter captain Javier Zanetti ahead of Saturday's trip to Livorno.

"We must stay calm. We've had a superb run and it's very hard to keep this tempo going, particularly in the Italian championship.

"We mustn't worry about the draw. We need to have the same confidence as before and focus on our objective of retaining the title."

Zanetti insisted Inter were looking no further than Livorno and would not be distracted by next

week's crunch Champions League match away to Valencia, who held the Italians to a 2-2 draw in the first leg of their last 16 tie.

"Our minds are fixed on Livorno as we want to bounce straight back in the championship," said the 33-year-old Argentine defender.

"It's an important match and we will not take it lightly. After Livorno we will think about Valencia."

Inter's dynamic French midfielder Patrick Vieira, still recovering from a torn right hamstring, will not play at the weekend and is highly unlikely to face the Spaniards.

Brazilian striker Adriano strained his left thigh against Udinese and is doubtful for both matches.

Inter's draw on Wednesday can hardly be seen as a crisis.

The club have not lost a match in all competitions since September 27, 2006 when they lost 2-0 at home to Bayern Munich in the Champions League. And their last league defeat was way back on March 30 of last year, a 1-0 loss at Empoli.

Roma, also playing on Saturday due to their Champions League involvement the following Tuesday, visit bottom club Ascoli.

With an eight-point lead over third-placed Palermo, Roma remain firm favourites to take the second automatic Champions League place for next season.

Ascoli have won just two games all season and look set for the drop to Serie B.

AC Milan, whose push for a top-four finish was stalled by a goalless draw at Palermo on Wednesday, host Chievo on Saturday.

Milan's draw in Sicily left them in sixth place on 37 points, one behind Empoli and three adrift of fourth-placed Lazio.

On Sunday Empoli travel to Udinese, while Lazio will be looking for their fourth successive victory when they entertain Sampdoria.

FIXTURES	
(all 1400GMT kick-off unless stated)	
Saturday	AC Milan v Chievo (1930), Ascoli v Roma, Livorno v Inter Milan
Sunday	Cagliari v Atalanta, Catania v Siena (behind closed doors at Rimini), Fiorentina v Torino, Lazio v Sampdoria, Messina v Palermo, Parma v Reggina, Udinese v Empoli

Strugglers take on leaders

AFP, Berlin



New Hamburg coach Huub Stevens will be looking to build on his side's return to form as they continue their battle against the team's first relegation in Bundesliga history against leaders Schalke 04.

The Dutchman, who took over four weeks ago with the mission of saving the club from the drop, takes his team to Schalke on Friday, a side he knows well having coached there from 1996-2002, leading them to the UEFA Cup in 1997 and the German Cup in 2001 and 2002.

The trip to the Arenaufschalke will surely bring back memories for Stevens of May 19, 2001 when Schalke were German champions for four minutes before Bayern Munich equalised 1-1 against Hamburg to grab the Bundesliga title.

Stevens has shown he is on the right track with his new charges with three consecutive wins largely thanks to four goals by Rafael van der Vaart.

But he warned against complacency as Hamburg sit 13th with just a single point separating them from Arminia Bielefeld, in the first relegation spot.

"Nothing is assured yet, we still have 11 finals to play," said Stevens.

Leaders Schalke, who have a

four-point advantage on VfB Stuttgart, will be looking to put their first home defeat Sunday to Bayer Leverkusen behind them, and put themselves back on the path to their first national title since 1958.

"We're not afraid of losing our place, we still have a four-point cushion," said Schalke coach Mirko Slomka.

Slomka will, however, be without Brazilian midfielder Lincoln, who is sitting out a five-match suspension for violence during last weekend's game, along with Peter Lovenkrands, Gustavo Varela, Christian Pander and Gerald Asamoah, with Miladen Krstajic also uncertain as he recovers from a broken rib.

Bayer Leverkusen, sitting eighth, look to continue their giant-killing exploits, this time at home against second-placed VfB Stuttgart, who qualified for the German Cup semi-finals midweek.

Leverkusen are on a five-

FIXTURES	
(1430GMT kick-off unless stated)	
Saturday	Hertha Berlin v Bayern Munich, Arminia Bielefeld v Nuremberg, Bayer Leverkusen v VfB Stuttgart, VfL Wolfsburg v Monchengladbach, Eintracht Frankfurt v Hannover, Werder Bremen v VfL Bochum
Sunday	Alemannia Aachen v Mainz 05 (1600), Borussia Dortmund v Energie Cottbus (1600)

match winning streak and have only lost one of their past ten matches.

And Stuttgart for their part have proven to be very dependent on top Bundesliga scorer Mario Gomez since the return from the winter break.

Werder Bremen, in third two points behind Stuttgart, host VfL Bochum, sitting 15th, whom they thrashed 6-0 in their last meeting.

Werder have lost the momentum since picking up the honorific title of Winter Champions. Since the return, the 2004 champions have won just two of their five matches, losing twice at their Westerstadion.

Bochum however have never recorded a win at Werder Bremen.

Elsewhere fourth-placed Bayern Munich, three points behind Werder Bremen, travel to sixth-placed Hertha Berlin, before hosting Spaniards Real Madrid Wednesday for their Champions League last 16, second leg match.

Bayern have not lost at the Olympic Stadium since December 2001.

"We have a great chance to take a new step in the right direction, we have to grab this opportunity," said Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

Zlatan ends Sweden snub

AFP, Stockholm

Striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic, absent from the Swedish national side in recent months, will be available for selection for their Euro 2008 championships qualifier against Northern Ireland, the Swedish football association said on Friday.

"After discussions with Zlatan he is now available for the national team," Swedish coaches Lars Lagerbaeck and Roland Andersson said in a statement published on the Swedish FA's website.

Sweden were without the striker for their Group F Euro 2008 championships qualifying matches against Iceland and group favourites Spain in October.

The 25-year-old Inter Milan forward has not played for his country since Lagerbaeck cut him from the selection against Liechtenstein, after he went out partying on the eve of the September 6 Euro qualifier.

Sweden face Northern Ireland on March 28 in Belfast.

Kachkar pens Marseille takeover

AFP, Marseille

Canadian businessman Jack Kachkar said Thursday he has completed the takeover of struggling French footballing giants Marseille after signing the final sale agreement with current owner Robert Louis-Dreyfus.

"I'm very happy to buy Marseille. This time has been a real trial for my family, advisors and myself because of the incessant rumours and the campaign of denigration which we were subjected to," said 43-year-old Kachkar.

"The transfer of deeds will be made in the coming weeks.

"In this way I promise I'll do everything in my power to make Olympique Marseille a champion club in all they undertake."

A spokesman for Louis-Dreyfus insisted however that the sale would not be finalised "until Kachkar has paid the price agreed by the two parties".

Kachkar, president of pharmaceutical firm Inyo which employs more than 575 people in North America and Europe, agreed to pay an estimated 115 million euro (151 million dollar) for the club.

The Canadian said the purchase had been possible with the support of "international banks who have links with France and the world of sport".

Marseille have had an inconsistent season, dropping three places to eighth in the French league after suffering a 3-0 drubbing at Toulouse on Saturday.

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Gunners on the edge

Football

AFP, London

A season which promised so much for Arsenal is teetering on the brink of disaster ahead of their Premiership meeting with Reading on Saturday.

A run of three straight defeats - the north London club's worst spell of form since October 2002, 263 matches ago -- has ended Arsene Wenger's interest in the FA Cup, dashed his dream of winning his first ever League Cup and jeopardised his chances of progress in the Champions League.

With the league title already out of reach, another unfulfilling campaign looms.

Arsenal have suffered from a raft of injuries, which threaten to deprive them of six first team players for the encounter with Reading, while the unseemly brawl which marred the end of last weekend's League Cup final against Chelsea has led to the suspensions of Emmanuel Adebayor, Kolo Toure and Emmanuel Eboue.

But a more pressing concern for Wenger is a notable lack of cutting edge which could yet endanger their chances of securing a top-four finish.

Arsenal have scored one goal in their last four matches and key personnel have stuttered just when Wenger needs them to be at their smoothest.

Thierry Henry has scored just once since January 21, while Cesc Fabregas has been one of the most high-profile examples of the club's recent indiscipline.

The young Spanish midfielder rowed publicly with Mark Hughes, the Blackburn manager, at the end of the clubs' first FA Cup meeting, and was then lucky to escape with just a yellow card after becoming embroiled in a shoving match with Frank Lampard in Cardiff last weekend.

It is indicative of the immaturity of Wenger's gifted, but occasionally graceless, young side. And one of their senior colleagues, Gilberto Silva, has called for a more measured approach in the coming weeks.

"I will speak to the young players and try to lift them because for them it is even more difficult," said the Brazilian midfielder.

"It is frustrating for them and hard because they are being made to carry all the responsibility for losing big games. But we need to stick together at this very important time and that applies to everyone -- the young guys and also the older players. That is the

only way that we can change our position.

"The last few games have been very frustrating and disappointing and the coming days won't be easy for us. We have to carry on because we have huge games coming up but it's hard because we only have a few days to save the rest of our season."

Arsenal may have produced one of their most exhilarating performances of the season in defeating Reading 4-0 in October, but the Royals will not be obliging opponents at the Emirates stadium.

Steve Coppell's side have already bloodied the noses of several members of the Premiership aristocracy -- including Manchester United and Chelsea -- and in Steve Sidwell they have a player who will be particularly desperate to impress.

Sidwell started his career as a youngster at Arsenal but Wenger decided not to award him a contract.

"It will be a special game," he said. "I'll always remember it as the best time of my life, but I had a new start at Reading and it's been fantastic.

"If we go there and take confidence from all our games this year then hopefully we can come away with a point -- or all three."

Premiership eyes HawkEye

Football

AFP, London

The English Premiership will push the game's rulers to follow the example of tennis and introduce HawkEye technology to end uncertainty over goal-line decisions.

Premier League referees' chief Keith Hackett and Premier League general secretary Mike Foster will present proposals to the International FA Board meeting in Manchester on Saturday.

Critics believe goal-line technology is a step in the wrong direction but Hackett insists the time has come for the game to modernise, but only in terms of judging whether it is a goal or not.

"Football is ultimately about scoring goals and the question I would ask, is would people be happy with the World Cup final, the most prestigious match there is, being decided by an inaccurate result? We want goals to be a decision based on fact, not opinion," Hackett told the Press Association.

Hackett's video presentation will include the Manchester United v Tottenham two seasons ago when goalkeeper Roy Carroll spilled a long-range shot from then-Spurs midfielder Pedro Mendes over the line but a goal was not given.

"We are working with HawkEye in order to seek approval from the International FA Board to run an experiment to test out a version

of goal-line technology," added Hackett.

"We believe we are putting forward a strong proposal that underlines what is available and how we want to experiment to gather data to accurately determine the quality of the product.

"We are suggesting a possible alternative to the other proposals with a reputable business company, Hawk-Eye, which already operates in top-level tennis and cricket.

"The system operates with cameras and computers linked directly to the referee, providing immediate information without interference, so we believe it fulfils all the criteria."

Parreira wants Benni back

Football

AFP, Johannesburg

South African coach Carlos Alberto Parreira expects informal star striker Benni McCarthy to end his long boycott of the national team after finding his feet in the English Premiership.

McCarthy, who has refused to play for the Bafana Bafana since 2005, took his tally for new club Blackburn Rovers to 16 when he scored an outstanding winner against Arsenal in the FA Cup in midweek.

The Brazilian Parreira is well aware that the prospects of a

turnaround in South African fortunes are heavily dependent on the 29-year-old McCarthy being enticed back into the fold.

"He has proved he is one of the best forwards we have and is scoring goals in England," Parreira said in an interview with The Star newspaper.

"I don't know about this coming game (against Chad), but we cannot say this boy is not available for the national team.

"All I know is that Benni wrote a letter saying he did not want to be considered while he established himself at Blackburn... I see him with the team in the future."

McCarthy, who has previously played for the Spanish

outfit Celta Vigo and Dutch giants Ajax, joined Blackburn in the close-season from Portuguese club FC Porto.

He turned his back on the national team after voicing frustration at being made the scapegoat for disastrous performance at the 2005 African Nations Cup in Egypt, when South Africa was dumped out in the first round, and over the team's failure to qualify for the last World Cup in Germany.

South Africa, the hosts of the next World Cup in 2010, have had a grim time of late and have seen their world ranking drop to a lowly 59 behind African minnows such as Burkina Faso.



Golfers (L to R) Colin Montgomerie, Chinarat Phadungsil, Retief Goosen and Ernie Els pose with 'Yum Yum', a four-year-old female elephant, during a photocall to launch the Johnnie Walker Classic on the beach in Phuket on Thursday.