



Boca Juniors striker Martin Palermo (C) shoots the ball past Charles Castro of Cucuta Deportivo during their Libertadores Cup semifinal match in Cucuta, Colombia on Thursday.

Heavyweights battle for supremacy

France and Ukraine go head-to-head in Paris on Saturday with top spot in Group B at stake for the winner.

World champions Italy will also be in action and should they complete the near-formality of beating the Faroe Islands, they could jump from fourth to first in the tight group.

The big losers could be Scotland, who have the day off as the other teams catch up their game in hand.

In group E, Russia, Croatia and Israel could heap more pressure and misery on England boss Steve McClaren if they all win while England play host to Brazil in a friendly at the new Wembley stadium.

Spain are also under pressure as they bid to keep up with Sweden and Northern Ireland in group F, but they face a potential banana skin in a trip to Riga to play Latvia.

But the main action should come at the Stade de France as France host Ukraine.

France's hopes have been boosted by injuries to three Ukrainian strikers, Chelsea's Andrey Shevchenko and Dynamo Kiev pair Sergey Rebrov and Artem Milevski, which could see the French backline in for a quiet night.

Those absences have left Ukraine boss Oleg Blokhine more than a little frustrated.

"We're going to have to do without three of our key players," he moaned. "Our main striker left, Andrey Voronin (of Bayer Leverkusen), is lacking match practice because the German season finished two weeks ago."

Another problem facing Blokhine is that many of his players lost their places in the starting line-ups at their club sides.

Spartak Moscow midfielder Maxim Kalinchenko and Shakhtar Donetsk forwards Alexei Bielik and Andrey Vorobei all lost their starting berths for their clubs.

"I don't understand what's going on with these players," moaned Blokhine. "Defenders

Spain desperate for a win

behind Sweden.

It means Spain can aim for second spot in the group and thus boost a campaign which has left many in the country wondering whether Luis Aragones and his men really deserve to go to the championships.

Spain follow Saturday's match with a trip to Liechtenstein, and should they not pick up at least four points against the two weakest sides in the group there will be serious calls for concern.

Joaquin Rodriguez, who was called back into the team after an impressive end of season at Valencia, admits Spain can not afford to under-estimate any of their opponents.

"We must keep telling ourselves that these matches are very important to get us into the Euro finals. We have to forget we are playing Latvia and

Another pocketful for Germany?

twice -- and even with a weakened side, the Germans can expect a bucket load of goals in Nuremberg with Klose partnering Kevin Kuranyi up front.

The 28-year-old struggled for form towards the end of the season, but alongside Schalke 04's Kuranyi, who netted twice in Germany's 2-1 win over the Czech Republic in March, the goals are expected to flow.

"Miroslav will start against San Marino," said Loew, whose side top Group D and are level on points with the Czech Republic and Ireland, but with a game in hand.

"We know he can perform, he had a superb World Cup and did well in the Bundesliga. He is a complete forward, even if his form

'Brazil is more than Ronnie and Kaka'

AFP, London

Brazil midfielder Gilberto Silva has warned England that his side don't just rely on Ronaldinho and Kaka to torment opponents.

Gilberto insists the presence of Barcelona's former World Player of the Year Ronaldinho and AC Milan midfielder Kaka, fresh from winning the Champions League, has put some equally fine talents in the shade.

"We are a group and I believe other sides think like this, not just about Ronaldinho and Kaka," Gilberto said. Of course, though, they are fantastic players.

"We have a good squad and with quality players that can make a difference."

Gilberto's tremendous work ethic makes him a crucial component of the Selecao, but the Arsenal player is adamant neither he nor his teammates begrudge Ronaldinho and Kaka their time in the spotlight.

"It does not annoy the rest of us because we know they have a high profile," he said. "We all feel very happy for them."

"When we are not with the national team, we see them with their clubs and how they are rated with a high profile in the press, how people enjoy watching them. For me, it is amazing when I hear so many nice things from them."

Ribery raring for Real

AFP, Madrid

Marseille's emblematic midfielder Frank Ribery could be set to join Spanish giants Real Madrid, according to a report here Friday.

The France international has been linked with several top clubs in recent weeks but according to Spanish sports daily Marca Real are being targeted by the player's agent.

"Ribery has confirmed that he will leave Marseille and Real Madrid are his number one choice," said the newspaper.

Marca said the 24-year-old's arrival could plug the hole left by the imminent departure of David Beckham, who will leave Real for American club LA Galaxy at the end of the season.

"In the past few days Ribery's agent has met with Real Madrid," added the report.

Reports from Germany recently linked Ribery to Bayern Munich, although that was later denied by the club.

Zurich coach heads to Berlin

AFP, Geneva

FC Zurich coach Lucien Favre is moving to Hertha Berlin in Germany, the Swiss club announced Friday.

Favre informed Zurich's board of his decision in person on Friday morning, the club said on its website.

The 49 year-old francophone Swiss coach guided FC Zurich to two successive Swiss championship titles in 2006 and 2007 during his four years at the club.

Hertha, who finished 10th in the Bundesliga this season, sacked coach Falko Goetz in April.

Ancelotti extends Milan deal

INTERNET, undated

Carlo Ancelotti has been rewarded with a new Milan contract for guiding the Rossoneri to Champions League glory this term.

The tactician has this evening renewed his agreement for a further two years and is now thus tied to the club until June 30, 2010.

Ancelotti was expected to extend his deal with the outfit and he put pen to paper on Thursday as the club confirmed on their official website.

"I am now even more a part of the Milan family," noted the former midfielder. "It only took a minute to agree terms and I'm delighted to have remained."

"The fact that we won the Champions League this season is also because the club backed me in November."

"Had I been at another club then they may have looked for a new Coach, but (Vice-President) Adriano Galliani is a great football official."

No financial details have been released but it is understood that Ancelotti's salary has shot up from 2.3m-pounds a season to around 3.5m-pounds.

The former Reggiana, Parma and Juventus boss arrived at Milan in 2001-02 when Fatih Terim was shown the door.

Since then he's won the Scudetto, the Coppa Italia and two European Cups while on the Rossoneri bench.

Hewitt winning hearts and minds?

AFP, Paris



He's fallen foul of various Argentinians, been tipped as the man most likely to get punched in the locker room and has routinely featured in lists of sports' most hated men.

But at 26-years-old, and now a doting dad, is Lleyton Hewitt finally carving out a place in the public's heart where the likes of Andre Agassi, John McEnroe and compatriot Pat Rafter have been so eagerly welcomed?

"Maybe, sometimes," said Hewitt after winning over a traditionally sceptical Parisian crowd for his spectacular come-from-behind 4-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-2, 6-4 victory against 2004 champion Gaston Gaudio at Roland Garros on Thursday.

"I felt like I had quite a lot of support out there today especially considering I was playing a guy who's won the title here a few years

ago. I felt like the crowd were on my side.

"I think they liked that I was putting in and giving 100-percent. I wasn't going to lie down. The French crowds enjoy a tight match. I certainly gave them that."

Hewitt has made a habit of coming back from such seemingly hopeless situations.

He overturned a two-set deficit to beat Guillermo Canas here in 2001 and did it again at the Australian Open in January this year when he was facing defeat in the first round against Michael Russell.

He even performed a similar salvage operation against Roger Federer in the semifinals of the 2003 Davis Cup.

Nobody doubts his talent and heart. It's been the Australian's demeanour which has aggravated opponents with his 'Come on' scream proving particularly irksome.

But six years after capturing the US Open title and world number one spot as a 20-year-old, and five after his Wimbledon triumph, Hewitt's personal battlery could be earning

more fans than detractors.

Hewitt, married to Australian actress Bec Cartwright and the father of 18-month-old daughter Mia, refuses to accept he has melowered as he slowly becomes one of the tour's senior citizens.

"I enjoy putting in the hard work and hopefully seeing it pay off," he said.

"I really enjoy that. I still think I can get better."

Hewitt faces Finland's Jarkko Nieminen, against whom he has never lost, in the third round here with a likely match-up against double defending champion Rafael Nadal in the round of 16 should he get through.

"I've had the better off Nieminen so far but he's a good player," said Hewitt.

"He's played well on hard court, grass, everything. It's going to be tough."

Mirza upbeat despite loss

AFP, Paris



India's Sania Mirza says she remains upbeat about her season despite the straight sets defeat to Serbia's Ana Ivanovic in the second round of the French Open on Thursday.

It was the 20-year-old from Hyderabad's first outing since injuring her right knee in a WTA tournament in Doha in February, which required surgery that left her in a wheelchair for a while.

"The match was set up as the battle of the forehands. We both hit really hard, but unfortunately she got the better of me today," Mirza said.

The Indian number 1 put her loss down to a lack of practice on the tour.

"Today my lack of match practice

really came into play. It was four all in the second set, and I had game point. I lost it. It's all about confidence, but I felt good out there."

Mirza admits that this year has been a struggle and she had "had to start from scratch" after two months lay-off following surgery on her knee.

"The rehab started two days after the surgery but it's been very, very hard," she said.

Even now, Mirza, the highest ranked Indian ever, who reached a career high ranking of 31 in 2005 and currently stands at 50, feels that her injured leg is still not back to full strength.

"It still feels like my left leg is a lot stronger than my right leg," she said.

Despite this, the young Indian is positive about her comeback, since she feared it would take her longer to get back into the game after not hitting a tennis ball for nine weeks.

"I think I'm playing okay. I probably thought personally that I would

take longer to start hitting the ball as well as I was when I stopped playing. But I'm hitting the ball okay."

She now has her sights set on her preferred surface -- grass, and is set to travel to tournaments in Birmingham and 's-Hertogenbosch followed by her third Wimbledon campaign near the end of June.

"Clay is not my favourite surface and I'm really looking forward to getting back on grass," she said.

"I'm expecting an interesting few matches in Birmingham. I have had a few good matches at Wimbledon in the past and I'm looking forward to playing there again this year."

Mirza hopes to build on her experience last year at Wimbledon where she lost to experienced Russian Elena Dementieva in the first round.



Russia's Olga Poutchkova hits a forehand against Slovakia's Daniela Hantuchova during their French Open second round match at Roland Garros on Friday.

Euro 2008 Qualifiers

21 matches scheduled for Saturday, June 2

7-29 June 2008

GROUP A

		Played / F / A / Points
1	Poland	7 12 5 16
2	Portugal	6 13 4 11
3	Serbia	6 8 4 11
4	Finland	6 7 3 11
5	Belgium	6 4 6 7
6	Azerbaijan	6 3 8 5
7	Armenie	6 2 13 4
8	Armenie	5 0 6 1

Kazakhstan - Armenie 1200 GMT
Azerbaijan - Poland 1600 GMT
Finland - Serbia 1615 GMT
Belgium - Portugal 1845 GMT

GROUP B

		Played / F / A / Points
1	Ukraine	5 8 4 12
2	Scotland	6 11 6 12
3	France	5 12 2 12
4	Italy	5 9 5 10
5	Georgia	6 13 12 6
6	Lithuania	5 3 5 4
7	Faroe Isles	6 1 23 0

Lituanie - Georgia 1800 GMT
France - Ukraine 1900 GMT
Faroe Isles - Italy 2045 GMT

GROUP C

		Played / F / A / Points
1	Turkey	5 14 3 13
2	Greece	5 8 4 12
3	Bosnie-H	5 10 12 7
4	Norway	5 9 6 7
5	Hungary	5 7 8 6
6	Malta	5 5 10 4
7	Moldavia	6 3 13 2

Bosnie-H. - Turkey 1800 GMT
Norway - Malta 1805 GMT
Greece - Hungary 1930 GMT

GROUP D

		Played / F / A / Points
1	Germany	5 21 3 13
2	Czech Rep.	6 15 4 13
3	Ireland	7 12 8 13
4	Slovakia	6 15 11 9
5	Wales	5 8 9 6
6	Cyprus	6 9 16 4
7	San Marino	5 1 30 0

Wales - Czech Rep. 1400 GMT
Germany - San Marino 1700 GMT

GROUP E

		Played / F / A / Points
1	Croatia	5 15 4 13
2	Israel	6 13 6 11
3	Russia	5 7 1 11
4	England	6 9 2 11
5	Macedoina	6 5 5 7
6	Estonia	5 0 10 0
7	Andorra	5 1 22 0

Russia - Andorra 1500 GMT
Macedoina - Israel 1730 GMT
Estonia - Croatia 1830 GMT

GROUP F

		Played / F / A / Points
1	N. Ireland	6 10 7 13
2	Sweden	5 9 4 12
3	Spain	5 9 6 9
4	Denmark	4 7 2 7
5	Latvia	4 4 3 3
6	Liechtenstein	5 3 15 3
7	Iceland	5 4 9 3

Iceland - Liechtenstein 1600 GMT
Denmark - Sweden 1800 GMT
Latvia - Spain 1830 GMT

GROUP G

		Played / F / A / Points
1	Netherlands	6 8 2 14
2	Romania	5 10 3 11
3	Bulgaria	5 7 3 9
4	Belarus	5 9 11 7
5	Slovenia	5 4 8 4
6	Albania	5 3 6 3
7	Luxembourg	5 1 9 0

Belarus - Bulgaria 1800 GMT
Albania - Luxembourg 1830 GMT
Slovenia - Romania 1845 GMT

Qualifiers

2 September 2006
- 21 November 2007

The top two teams
in each group qualify
for the final phase

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