

Top seeded Swiss Roger Federer serves to Scoville Jenkins of the United States during their first round encounter of the US Open at the National Tennis Center at Flushing Meadows in New York on Monday. PHOTO: AFP

Top seeds sail smoothly

AFP, New York

World number ones Roger Federer and Justine Henin breezed over qualifiers Monday into the second round of the US Open while reigning Grand Slam champions Serena and Venus Williams also advanced handily.

Three-time defending champion Federer, seeking his 12th Grand Slam singles crown, opened the year's final Grand Slam event with a 6-3, 6-2, 6-4 victory over 320th-ranked American Scoville Jenkins in 92 minutes.

"I'm happy to have won my first one. I'm happy I'm through," Federer said. "It always feels like a bit of a relief. Now I can relax a little maybe."

Henin, still battling a sore shoulder, took 62 minutes to beat 145th-ranked German Julia Goerges 6-0, 6-3. She won the first set in 24 minutes, aided by Goerges' six

double faults and 15 unforced errors, and cruised to the finish.

"I'm glad to win that way. Nothing special today," said Henin. "I was a bit concerned the last few days with my shoulder. It's getting better but still a little scary."

Eighth seed Serena Williams, who won her eighth Grand Slam title in January at the Australian Open, showed some rust from a long layoff due to a thumb injury but defeated Germany's Angelique Kerber 6-3, 7-5.

"I wasn't playing my best at all," she said. "I made so many errors out there. It was frustrating but I kept going."

The younger Williams sister had not played since a Wimbledon quarterfinal loss to Henin.

"I'm excited to be playing tennis instead of running and practicing," said Serena Williams. "It's a relief to be playing in a tournament."

Reigning Wimbledon champion Venus Williams ripped Hungarian

qualifier Kira Nagy 6-2, 6-1 in 54 minutes. The 12th-seeded American, a six-time Grand Slam winner, fired a main-draw women's record 129-mph serve in the first set.

"I got really excited. I'm so stoked on breaking that record," she said. "I wasn't even expecting to do that at all. That's just how it comes."

Venus Williams next plays Romania's Ioana Raluca Olaru, who ousted American Ashley Harkleroad 7-5, 1-6, 6-4. Serena Williams will next meet Italy's Maria Elena Camerin, who beat Russian Tatiana Poutchek 6-3, 7-6.

Federer, 26, seeks his 12th Grand Slam title in pursuit of the all-time record 14 won by Pete Sampras and his fourth US Open crown in a row. Not since Bill Tilden's run from 1920 to 1925 has anyone won four consecutive US Opens.

Federer, chasing the all-time Slam record of 14 titles set by Pete

Sampras, also began his 187th week in a row atop the rankings to break the record streak as world number one that he has shared with Steffi Graf's 1987-1991 run.

The second round foe for Federer is another qualifier, Paul Capdeville. The Chilean ousted Germany's Rainer Schuettler 5-7, 6-3, 6-7, 6-4, 6-3.

Henin, seeking a seventh Slam title after taking her fourth French Open title in June, next plays Tsvetana Pironkova of Bulgaria who defeated Olga Poutchekova of Russia 6-3, 6-4.

Britain's Andy Murray, who missed Wimbledon and the French Open, made a triumphant Grand Slam return from a wrist injury by defeating Uruguay's Pablo Cuevas 6-2, 6-3, 6-0.

The 19th-seeded Scotsman fired six aces and 37 winners against four double faults and 35 unforced errors to win after one hour and 43 minutes, booking a

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Argentina name top stars

AFP, Sydney

Argentina's top European-based stars will travel Down Under next month for a friendly with the Socceroos, Football Federation Australia (FFA) said Tuesday.

Even though Europe's leagues are in full swing, FFA said players such as Barcelona's Lionel Messi, Manchester United's Carlos Tevez and Liverpool's Javier Mascherano would make the long trip to Australia.

The September 11 match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground was originally scheduled for June 6 but the Argentinian Football Federation requested a delay so it could include more European players on its squad.

FFA chief executive Ben Buckley said it would be worth the wait.

"Argentina are bringing down some of the greats of world football," Buckley said.

"It will truly be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Australian sports fans to see some of the

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Ronaldinho now Spanish

AFP, Madrid

Two of Barcelona's stars swore Monday - Ronaldinho on the Spanish constitution as he officially obtained dual nationality and Andres Iniesta that the club would do better after the dismal goalless draw at Santander on the weekend.

"We need to indulge in some self-criticism - clearly we didn't play well yesterday," Iniesta told reporters while Ronaldinho was engaged in tying up the administrative requirements of his citizenship, four years after arriving from Paris Saint Germain, in the suburb

of Gava.

Mexican teammate Giovanni dos Santos is also set to obtain dual nationality in the coming days, meaning that Barca will then only have Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o and Ivory Coast defender Toure Yaye as non-EU players in their squad.

Ronaldinho and his teammates came in for severe criticism after Sunday's league opener which left the Catalan club two points behind title holders Real Madrid, who edged out Atletico in their first match.

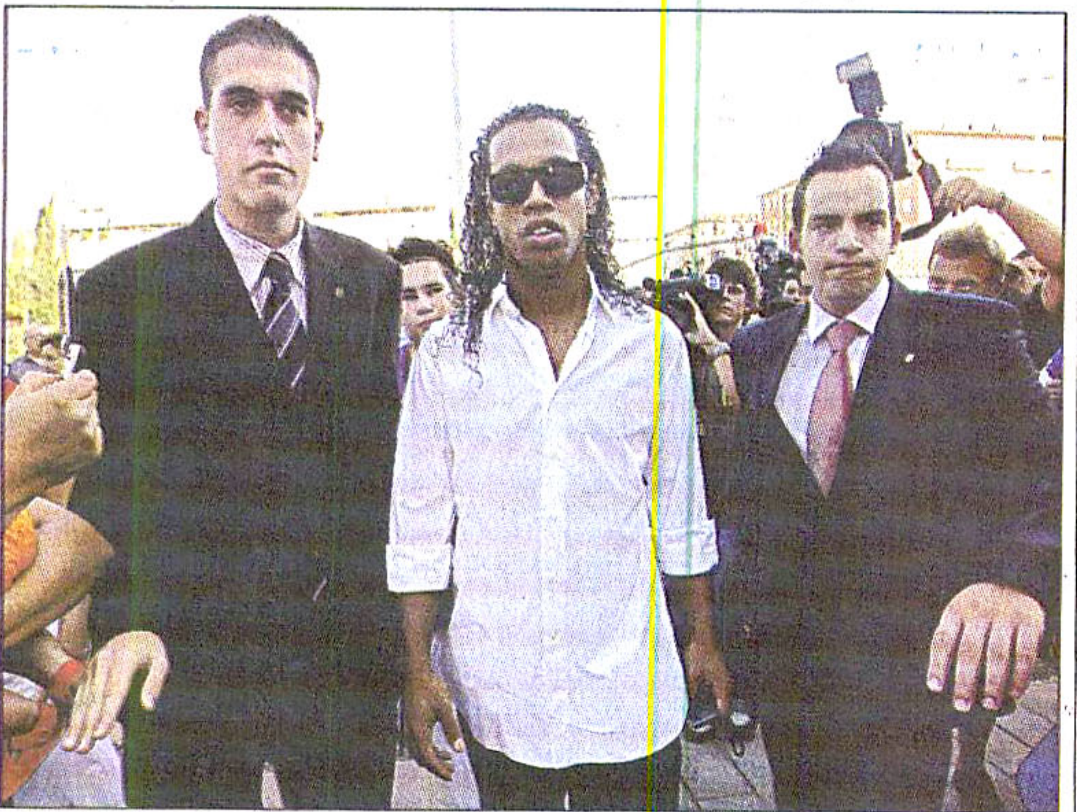
Neither the Brazilian nor fellow "Fantastic Four" forwards Thierry Henry, Lionel Messi and Eto'o shone in a dull showing, which

drew the ire of the media and former coach Johan Cruyff.

"It's the same old mistakes, nothing has changed," the Dutch legend said in a column for the Catalan newspaper El Periodico.

Midfielder Iniesta admitted that "we lacked a little freshness and turn of speed, but we have hope something positive will come out" of Sunday's below-par showing.

Spanish newspaper AS claimed earlier that Ronaldinho wanted to leave because he is fed up at paying high taxes in Spain but Barca's technical secretary Txiki Begiristain said: "He is staying with us," a judgement seemingly bolstered by the Brazilian picking up his new passport.



Barcelona's Brazilian striker Ronaldinho (C) enters the Gava magistrates' court near Barcelona after pledging his allegiance to the Spanish Constitution on Monday. PHOTO: AFP

Puerta's condition worsens

AFP, Madrid

Sevilla defender Antonio Puerta's condition has worsened since he suffered a heart attack during a Spanish league match on Saturday, the hospital where he was admitted said Tuesday.

The 22-year-old Spanish international is in "very critical" condition in the intensive care unit of Sevilla's Virgen del Rocío hospital where he is hooked up to life support machine, the hospital said in a statement.

"The clinical evolution of the patient is unfavourable," it said, adding the prolonged cardiac arrest had damaged Puerta's organs and led to a lack of oxygen to the brain.

Puerta collapsed after half an hour of Sevilla's 4-1 win over Getafe on the opening day of the Spanish season.

He was able to walk gingerly to the dressing rooms where he collapsed a second time before being taken to hospital.

In January 2004 Benfica's Hungarian international striker Miklos Feher died during a Portuguese league match from a heart attack just seven months after Cameroon international Marc-Vivien Foe collapsed and died while playing in the Confederations Cup tournament in France.

Drenthe escapes injury

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's new Dutch midfielder Royston Drenthe escaped unharm after he was involved in a road accident with a police car, Spanish sports daily Marca reported on Tuesday.

Drenthe's Audi collided with the police vehicle in the centre of Madrid in the early hours of Monday after the 20-year-old Dutch international made a wrong turn on a ring road, the newspaper said.

While the player and his three passengers were not injured in the accident, a policeman was treated for whiplash.

Drenthe, who joined Real Madrid from Feyenoord earlier this month in a deal worth 14 million euros (19 million US dollars), passed a breathalyser, the newspaper reported.

Gerrard out of C League clash

INTERNET, undated

Steven Gerrard's days of being patched-up and sent out to play for Liverpool's cause when he is not fully fit seem to be numbered.

Manager Rafael Benitez believes he has a big enough and strong enough squad now not to take risks with his most prized asset.

Admittedly he took that risk with Gerrard just over a week ago against Chelsea when he played with a hairline toe fracture after a pain-killing injection but that was a special case.

Gerrard will not play against Toulouse in the second leg of the Champions League third qualifying round and he will be monitored carefully ahead of Saturday's home Barclays Premier League match with Derby.

The injury could throw Gerrard's involvement with England in Euro 2008 qualifiers against Israel and Russia next month into doubt, although Steve McClaren will almost certainly name Gerrard in his squad on Friday.

Benitez, who is also without Jamie Carragher on Tuesday night as the defender recovers from a broken rib and collapsed lung, has spelled out the safety-first treatment of his captain.

"I hope Steven will be okay for the weekend but the Champions League game will be a risk. It is better to keep him training here," he said.

"The doctor needs to decide after talking to the player when he can be risked."

"I do not want to lose Steve for a long time when you have enough players now for every game."

"If you push him too much it will be a risk. I want to keep him training and fit but ready. Maybe when he is not always 100% we can leave him out, that is what we will do."

Benitez will use Peter Crouch from the start on Tuesday night and replace Gerrard in midfield with either Mohamed Sissoko or Javier Mascherano.

Gerrard's ongoing recovery will then be monitored carefully. Last season he may well have been

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Monaco look to take advantage

AFP, Paris

Southern heavyweights Monaco and Marseille will be looking to take advantage of the absence of surprise leaders Nancy to continue their push for the summit in French first division action midweek.

Third-placed Monaco, who dislodged Le Mans from top spot Saturday, travel to Lille on Wednesday, while Marseille will be looking to follow on from their 2-1 win over Caen to move up from 11th place when they host Nice.

Nancy are sitting top of the league but their trip to Toulouse and Caen's visit to Lens have been pushed back because of European action this week.

Monaco, three points behind

Nancy in third, are beginning to bare their teeth this season, after a disappointing 2006-2007.

Brazilian coach Ricardo seems to have found the winning formula with the Riviera outfit closing in on the summit after three consecutive victories.

A win at home against Lille will put them equal on points with Nancy.

But they can take nothing for granted against the northerners who remain unbeaten despite having just seven points to show

FIXTURES

Tuesday (all times GMT)
Lorient v Valenciennes (1900)
Wednesday (1830 unless stated)
Marseille v Nice (1630), Auxerre v Rennes, Le Mans v Paris SG, Lille v Monaco, Metz v Bordeaux, Saint Etienne v Strasbourg, Sochaux v Lyon (1845)

from five matches.

"It's positive because it has been a while since we been in this position," said Monaco midfielder stalwart Lucas Bernardi.

"We've shown what we can do but there are still things to improve. It's easier to work and correct little things when you're coming off a win. We're on the right track."

Six-time champions Lyon desperately need to come away at least with a point from Sochaux, as they lie tenth, following two away losses.

Lyon coach Alain Perrin will be feeling the pressure as he heads to his former club who have had a disappointing start to the season under his successor Frederic Hantz, sitting second from bottom with just two points.

Marseille, sitting 11th with six points, will be looking to follow on from their first win this season in Normandy, against 13th-placed

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Domenech suspended

AFP, Paris

France coach Raymond Domenech is to appeal against his one-match ban and 10,000 Swiss Francs (6,000 euros/8,000 dollars) fine, handed out by UEFA for bringing the game into disrepute, the French Football Federation (FFF) said Tuesday.

Domenech will miss France's

key European qualifier against Italy on September 8 as a result.

The French coach has three days to appeal the decision taken by European football's Control and Disciplinary board following inappropriate remarks made in an interview to French newspaper Le Parisien earlier this month.

Domenech alluded to "a referee being bought" during a tie between France and Italy's under-21 sides in 1999. Domenech was coach of the junior French team at the time.

The French Football Federation said it would hold talks with Domenech on Tuesday.

"Raymond Domenech acknowledges the decision. There's no reaction. He will hold talks from Tuesday with the federation and they will make a decision together on what action to take in regard to the UEFA decision," a FFF spokesman said.

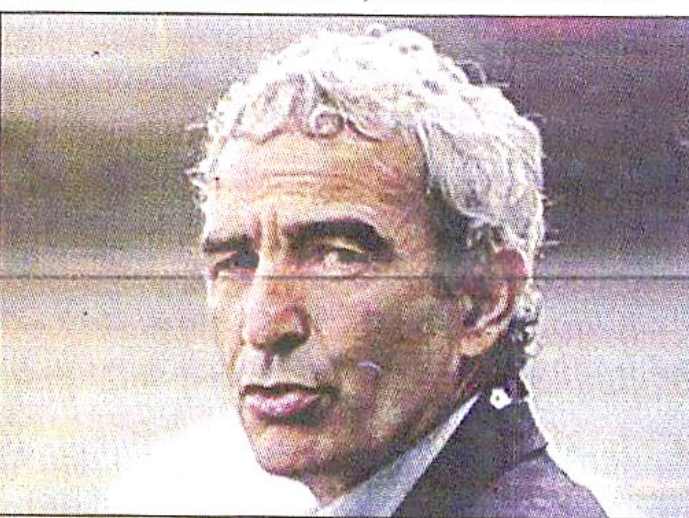
But the FFF said it would: "use the channels of appeal offered by UEFA with the aim of doing everything possible so that the France coach can effectively manage the France team on September 8 at the San Siro stadium in Milan."

The comments come amid the fall-out from the 2006 World Cup final which France lost to Italy after French star Zinedine Zidane was sent off for headbutting Italian defender Marco Materazzi.

The European qualifier is crucial for qualification with France winning their home time 3-1 at Stade de France.

France lead Group B with 18 points, two points ahead of Italy with Scotland on 15.

A suspended coach is banned from the touchline and the dressing rooms during a match but can watch as a spectator in the stadium and give instructions by mobile telephone.



RAYMOND DOMENECH

Solskjaer calls it quit

AFP, London

Manchester United's Norwegian striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer on Tuesday announced his retirement from football.

Solskjaer, 34, is a hero at Old Trafford having scored the winning goal in the 1999 Champions League final, after coming on as a substitute.

But the "Baby-Faced Assassin" has long suffered from knee problems and has played little over the last four years.

Solskjaer told the Man United website: "I would like to thank the manager, the coaching and medical staff and most of all the supporters, who have supported me through my career. They have been fantastic and were a real inspiration to me when I was injured."

"The support the fans and the staff showed me during that time was the main motivation for me making my comeback. I feel proud to have represented Manchester United for 11 years and have some very special memories."

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson paid tribute to one of his greatest servants during his leadership of the club.

"Ending your playing career is a sad day for anyone, in the case of Ole, he has 11 fantastic years he can look back on," said Ferguson.

"Ole has achieved everything a player could ever wish to achieve. He has been a great servant to the club and has always remained a model professional in his responsibility as a player, in his demeanour and his manners have always been exemplary. Ole will hopefully go on to be a good coach."

United chief executive David Gill also paid tribute to one of the most popular players among the Old Trafford faithful.

"Ole has provided us all with some exceptional memories during his time here at the club," he said.

"Nobody will ever forget his dramatic winner in Barcelona, but much more than that his dedication and professionalism make him one of the great role models in football."

"Ole will be dearly missed as a player, but will go on to serve the club as an ambassador and a valuable coach."

Solskjaer had not appeared in any of United's matches this season.

His last game was the FA Cup final defeat to Chelsea on May 19 when he came on as an extra-time

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Wenger confident of success

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger believes Arsenal's growing pains have given his players a steely determination that will ensure there is no Champions League letdown against Sparta Prague.

Wenger's side go into Wednesday's third qualifying round second leg with a place in the lucrative group stage within touching distance after winning 2-0 in Prague two weeks ago.

But such a comfortable lead can breed complacency as Arsenal found out at the same stage of the competition last season. They won the first leg easily against Dinamo Zagreb, but fell behind early in the return before eventually scraping through.

Wenger is confident there will be no repeat against the Czech champions because his team are so much more mature now.

Cesc Fabregas, Gael Clichy, Emmanuel Adebayor and company have found out the hard way

that the art of closing out matches can make or break a team's season.

They lost the League Cup final to Chelsea after taking the lead and then squandered the advantage in their Champions League second leg against PSV Eindhoven.

But late winners against Fulham and Manchester City during an unbeaten start to this season have proved they have the mental strength to wear down obdurate opponents.

"We created chances against City but even when things didn't go for us we kept going," Wenger said. "We won in the last seconds at Fulham, we scored a second goal at Prague in the dying moments, we missed a penalty and still won the game on Saturday."

"That is a recognition of what is going on in this team and how we are progressing. You get strength and confidence when you grow older."

"I am mentally stronger now than when I am 19 or 20. Time and experience give you confidence to do something with your talent. They make you realise that you are as good as any other player."

After being perceived as a soft touch for several years, Arsenal have started to bite back at the bullies this season.

Sparta's game plan in the first leg was clearly built around the belief they could kick Arsenal out of their stride. But Fabregas's crunching tackle on Tomas Repka, Sparta's hulking defensive enforcer, underlined why that label should soon be a thing of the past.

Togo striker Adebayor is another who often went missing when the going got tough and he acknowledges the team has learned they must be more physical.

"A lot of players have learned that we have to fight hard to win games," Adebayor said. "We know people say 'they are kids and don't want to play as soon as we kick them'."

"But we stand up for it and we are ready for it, if they kick us we are going to want to beat that person."

"They call us kids but we are ready and we will be up for it. That is what the game asked for on Saturday."

"It was a difficult game. They

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SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Roberto Abbondanzieri (Getafe), Oscar Ustari (Getafe), Sergio Romero (AZ Alkmaar)

Defenders: Gabriel Heinze (Real Madrid), Daniel Diaz (Getafe), Gabriel Milito (Barcelona), Fabricio Coloccini (Deportivo La Coruna), Nicolas Burdisso (Inter Milan), Javier Zanetti (Inter Milan)

Midfielders: Fernando Gago (Real Madrid), Martin Demichelis (Bayern Munich), Jonas Gutierrez (Mallorca), Javier Mascherano (Liverpool), Federico Insua (America, Mexico), Cristian Ledesma (Olympiakos)

Forwards: Maxi Rodriguez (Atletico Madrid), Sergio Aguero (Atletico Madrid), Javier Saviola (Real Madrid), Hernan Crespo (Inter Milan), Carlos Tevez (Manchester United), Lionel Messi (Barcelona).