



PHOTO: AFP
US star Venus Williams exults after winning match-point in her quarterfinal against Serbian Jelena Jankovic at the US Open in Flushing Meadows on Wednesday.

Ballack not for sale

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea have dismissed claims that they are planning to off-load Michael Ballack in the January transfer window after leaving him out of their squad for the group stage of the Champions League.

The Germany captain was not among the 23-man list submitted to UEFA on Friday but Chelsea insisted that decision was taken purely because he would not be fit for most of the six group games, following ankle opera-

tions in April and July.

In a statement released on Thursday, Chelsea said: "There is no other reason for the decision and suggestions to the contrary are unfair on both Michael, who is attempting to get fit as soon as possible, and our medical team in whom we have every confidence."

Germany coach Joachim Low claimed on Wednesday that Ballack did not understand why he had been left out of the squad and said the midfielder was expecting to be back much sooner than the Chelsea medical staff were predicting.

Low is hoping to have

Ballack back in the national team by mid-October. If he is ready to play by then he would also be available for all but the first two of Chelsea's six group matches in the Champions League.

Reports in the British media have suggested that Ballack has been left out of the squad to ensure he can still join another Champions League club in January.

That would allow Chelsea to maximise the transfer value of a player who has not made as big an impact as had been expected when he joined the London club from Bayern Munich at the start of last season.

8x3

Venus saves family honour

Tennis

AFP, New York

Wimbledon champion Venus Williams outlasted Serbian third seed Jelena Jankovic 4-6, 6-1, 7-6 (7/4) Wednesday to reach the US Open semifinals, where she will defend family honour against Justine Henin.

US 12th seed Williams fired 60 winners and made 57 unforced errors but struck true when it mattered most, seizing a 5-1 lead in the tie-breaker and winning with an overhead smash after two hours 27 minutes.

"She played unbelievable. She fought well," Jankovic said. "She was better at the end."

World number one Henin ousted Serena Williams in a Tuesday quarterfinal to put herself in the path of elder sister Venus, who is 7-1 lifetime with seven triumphs in a row against the Belgian star entering Friday's showdown.

"I was so disappointed," Venus Williams said. "More than anything she's my little sister. Watching her be upset was hard for me. I've got to play very well Friday for her."

Henin and Venus Williams, each a six-time Grand Slam win-

ner, have not played each other since Williams beat Henin in a 2003 Australian Open semifinal.

Beating both Williams sisters in the same Slam has been done only once, when Martina Hingis downed Serena in a quarterfinal and Venus in a semi at the 2001 Australian Open.

Friday's other semifinal will be an all-Russian affair sending fourth seed Svetlana Kuznetsova against sixth seed Anna Chakvetadze.

Kuznetsova, whose only Grand Slam title came at the 2004 US Open, defeated Hungarian teen Agnes Szavay 6-1, 6-4 in 67 minutes while Chakvetadze reached her first Slam semifinal by beating Israeli 18th seed Shahar Peer 6-4, 6-1.

"She's a favourite in this match. I have nothing to lose. It's easier to play with no pressure," Chakvetadze said. "I'm playing well but I still feel I'm not playing my best. I'm getting better each day. Hopefully I'll be better Friday."

Kuznetsova, who won prior meetings with Chakvetadze in a 2006 Warsaw semi and the 2006 Eastbourne round of 16, said she has never felt so strong so late in a tournament and is playing well enough to match her 2004 title form.

"I just feel so fresh for the semi-

final and I'm ready to go and give it my best shot," Kuznetsova said. "Definitely the pressure is going to be more on me but I will still try to stay tough, to play tough."

Venus Williams, who last reached the US Open semifinals in 2002, won 10 years to the day after her only other US Open third-set tie-breaker victory, which came against Irina Spirieva after a bumping incident on a changeover.

In the tie-breaker, Jankovic sprayed three forehand errors in a row to give Williams a 5-1 lead. Williams hit a forehand volley winner to reach match point, smacked a backhand wide, then smashed a winner to end it.

After surrendering a break to open the second set, Williams reeled off six games in a row to put herself in command, although neither player managed a break in the third set.

"If I can continue to play like I did in the second set, things will continue to go well for me," Venus Williams said.

Jankovic broke with impressive lob winners in the opening games of the first and second sets, jumping on Williams early each time.

In the first set, Jankovic denied Williams on two break points in the fourth game and then broke the lanky American again for a 4-1

edge. Williams broke back in the sixth game but Jankovic held twice more to claim the set.

Kuznetsova will replace compatriot Maria Sharapova as world number two in Monday's new WTA rankings with Jankovic's loss.

"Definitely I believe in myself," Kuznetsova said. "Next match is extremely tough with Anna. I'm glad there will be a Russian in the final."

Kuznetsova, 22, raced to a 3-0 lead, saved two break points in the fifth game to seize a 4-1 edge and finished off the first set in only 26 minutes.

"I'm so happy with my performance, especially in the first set," Kuznetsova said. "I felt very good."

Szavay, 18, was the first debutante to reach the US Open last eight since Venus Williams a decade ago but failed to become the first Hungarian women Slam semifinalist.

Chakvetadze, 20, came into the US Open on a high after taking four titles this year, including US Open tune-ups at Stanford and Cincinnati, and was determined to disappoint a crowd primarily pulling for Peer.

"I thought: 'I will die on this court but I will not lose,'" Chakvetadze said.

Baros to miss qualifier

AFP, Prague

Czech striker Milan Baros will be out of the Euro 2008 Championship qualifier against San Marino on Saturday because of a back injury, the team doctor announced on Thursday.

"Unfortunately, the worst scenario has been confirmed. It is not just a muscle injury but also a small haematoma," Petr Krejci declared in a news conference in Prague. "He needs a complete rest in the coming days," he added, without however excluding the 25 year old's participation in the home tie against the Republic of Ireland on September 12.

Top striker in the Euro-2004 competition with five goals, the Lyon attacker was injured during team training on Wednesday.

He could be replaced up front by one of the finds of the recent under 20 world championships, Martin Fenin. Fenin, who plays for Czech league team FK Teplice, helped his country reach the finals.

The Czech Republic is currently second placed in the qualification group, trailing Germany by five points and one point ahead of Ireland.

Richards is a Viera fan

Football

AFP, London

Micah Richards will take a leaf out of his idol Patrick Vieira's book and get physical as he tries to consolidate his place in the England team.

Off the pitch, Richards is a gentle giant but he wants to draw on some attributes that can give him a crucial edge when Israel visit Wembley for Saturday's Euro 2008 qualifier.

The Manchester City defender was a huge fan of Vieira during the France star's time at Arsenal and also admired former Manchester United midfielder Roy Keane.

Both players used intimidation to mark out their territory with menacing effect and Richards is starting to bring a touch of those two enforcers to his own game.

Richards is only 19 but the boy already looks a man.

He has a muscular upper body and thighs the size of tree trunks, so it's safe to say any Israeli foolish enough to try to take him on will remember the force of his thudding tackles.

Richards agrees England will need a touch of blood and thunder in a crunch match that will go a long way to deciding whether they reach next year's Euro finals.

"I supported Arsenal when I was

growing up so I admired Patrick Vieira," he said. "I would wear a Vieira shirt on the streets when I was young."

"I liked Roy Keane as well, they were my favourite two players. They were both aggressive box-to-box players."

"Vieira was all over the pitch and Keane had great leadership qualities as well."

"If you go into a tackle with a bit of venom like they did, you get a bit more respect from players. It's alright if it's fair."

With Gary Neville sidelined through injury, Richards is well on the way to making the right-back position his own and he believes he can keep it, even when the Manchester United star returns.

"If I am playing 100 per cent, I feel I am doing well enough to stay in there," he said. "I know Gary Neville is a legend but I see it as if you are playing well, you should keep your place."

"I don't see it as just keeping the place warm for him. I feel I've done well enough to stay in. It is up to the manager to decide."

"For now I see myself as a right-back. I am playing centre-half for Man City and long term hopefully centre-half with England."

"While I am still young and fresh I don't mind playing right-back. You get to go up and down and get more involved in the attacking play."

"It is strange playing there once every few weeks with England when you haven't been playing there with your club. It is a bit different but you get used to it."

England's players frequently get a rough ride for letting their millionaire lifestyles put them in a cosseted bubble far removed from the fans who pay their wages.

But Richards is determined not to forget his up bring on the rundown Chapel town estate in Leeds. He may have the world at his feet but, with the help of his father Lincoln, he won't let them leave the Manchester United star returns.

"I still keep in touch with Chapel town mates," Richards said. "I saw them at Leeds carnival. It is a bit different here. We stay in nice hotels but I take it as it comes."

"I've got my own house with my brother, but my dad is around once a week keeping an eye on me."

"He is out in Africa in Ethiopia doing a soccer school for kids for three years, just trying to give kids a chance. I hope to get involved in that in the next couple of years."

"I've had a great opportunity but obviously I come from a rough area in Chapel town where a load of people around there don't have a lot."

"My dad just thought it was a good idea to give something back."

Hargreaves believes in England

AFP, London

Owen Hargreaves believes England will be able to take advantage of Israel's lack of big-match experience in their vital Euro 2008 qualifier on Saturday.

The stakes couldn't be any higher at Wembley as Steve McClaren's side try to get their bid to reach next year's finals back on track.

Only a win will do for England, while the visitors must avoid defeat to keep in the hunt for a top-two finish in Group E.

These are the kind of occasions that the best players thrive on and England's squad is packed full of experience of the biggest Premier League and Champions League games.

In contrast, Israel have few top-level stars and Manchester United midfielder Hargreaves doubts whether they will be able to withstand England's planned assault and the vociferous atmosphere generated by an 80,000 sell-out crowd.

"I think it is difficult for them. I don't think they are accustomed to playing in this type of atmosphere and this type of game," Hargreaves said.

"They don't have the players who play at big clubs. Possibly one or two but our whole squad does."

"We are used to those expectations. I've never been in a game even against the best teams in the world when we want a draw or play to defend."

"I think possibly they will not be used to the atmosphere at the beginning."

"That's why we have to keep the tempo high for the first 30 minutes and try to get a goal or two."

"That will completely change the flow of the game because if they keep a clean sheet for the first 30 minutes they will become more comfortable and confident."

"We are going to get forward and attack, take chances and hopefully score goals. If we do that it should be a comfortable game for us."

With Wayne Rooney, David Beckham, Frank Lampard and Peter Crouch sidelined through injury and suspension, McClaren has a dearth of attacking options to breakdown Israel's packed defence.

The visitors are certain to take a cautious approach that could leave Hargreaves under-employed in midfield, presenting the opportunity for a few rare forays forward.

The former Bayern Munich star hasn't scored since his move to Old Trafford and, when asked, he struggled to remember the last time he did hit the back of the net. But that won't stop him trying his luck against Israel.

"It's not really one of my biggest strengths," he said. "I can score goals as well but so far it is not something that has been asked of me. I'm more there for the defensive side of things."

"We've got great players going forward and hopefully we can get goals. I don't care if it's from me or anybody else as long as we win the game."

8x3

8x2

8x3