

Sania fit and ready to fire

AFP, Perth

Indian sensation Sania Mirza is confident she has conquered injury problems that dogged her progress this year and is ready to climb back up the world rankings.

Mirza shook off her first singles loss since October, at the mixed teams Hopman Cup here on Saturday, saying she pleased with her overall performance and was geared up for 2008.

"On the whole, I feel pretty good," the 21-year-old said.

"My main goal is to stay healthy for the whole year because last year (2007) I missed three or four months and that is taking half the season away."

"I'd like to stay healthy and play the whole season - hopefully I'll just keep moving up (the rankings)."

"The rankings will take care of themselves if you are doing the right thing," she said.

Mirza suffered a range of injuries this year, including wrist and abdominal problems, and had surgery on her right knee in March.

Despite the setbacks, she used her trademark powerful forehand to notch wins over world number 16 Patty Schnyder and former world number one Martina Hingis as well as others, and reached the final at Stanford. She soared to a career-high ranking of 27 in August before finishing the season at 31.

Mirza, the first Indian woman to reach the top 50, said her game was in good shape and she was satisfied with her overall results this year.

"I was injured and I had surgery and came back after three months," she said. "I started playing really well in the summer in America and it gave me a lot of confidence, beating top players every week."

"It was one of my best years, because I did reach my highest ranking and I felt like I was hitting the ball better than ever."

Mirza lost her first Hopman Cup singles, a two-and-a-half-hour three-set marathon against 52nd-ranked American Meghann Shaughnessy.

The Indian led 3-1 in the deciding set, but dropped the last five games of the match after suffering a cramp which restricted her movement.

"It had been a while since I played a match, I think it was in October," she said. "Meghann has been a top 20 player and is a great player."

"I am happy with the way I played, it was a little up and down but I think you have to expect that at the beginning of the season."

Serena set to defend title

AFP, Perth

American superstar Serena Williams finally arrived in Australia on Sunday, tired and several days late, but confident she was on track to defend her Australian Open title.

The world No.7 arrived here early Sunday morning to compete in the mixed teams Hopman Cup, having taken a circuitous route from her US base in Miami via New York and Dubai.

Williams cited stomach flu as the reason for her late arrival, with Meghann Shaughnessy successfully substituting as Mardy Fish's partner in the USA's opening tie victory over India on Saturday.

Having caught a few hours sleep after flying in at 3:00 am, Williams yawned her way through a practice session, but hit the ball crisply and looked in good shape.

The 26-year-old said she believed the guaranteed match practice of the Hopman Cup was the ideal preparation for 2008's first Grand Slam.

Williams warmed up for this year's Australian Open by playing in Hobart, where she was eliminated in the quarter finals.

However, she then went to Melbourne ranked 86th in the world and stunned the tennis world by fighting her way through to the final, where she thrashed Maria Sharapova 6-1 6-2 to claim her eighth Grand Slam title.

The Australian Open starts on January 14 and Williams explained she wanted a break between her warm-up tournament and the Grand Slam.

She used the same preparation in 2003, when she won both the Hopman Cup and Australian Open.

"Last year was cutting it close, I never like to play the week before a Grand Slam," she said.

"Especially as defending champion, I really wanted to make sure I was here trying to get ready."

Despite the illness setback and also missing the season ending tournament in Madrid in November with a knee problem, Williams said she was satisfied with her preparation for the Australian Open.

Williams said she barely rested at the end of the season.

"I had a whole week (off), so that was not long at all," she said.

"I am definitely feeling fully prepared."

"It has been really good, I have been trying to train a little bit and have some fun."

The Hopman Cup will also offer Williams invaluable practice on the controversial new Plexicushion surface that is also being used for the Australian Open.



PHOTO: AFP

Serbian Jelena Jankovic makes a forehand return in her match against Chinese Taipei's Hsieh Su-Wei at the Hopman Cup in Perth on Sunday.

Jankovic struggles to win

Tennis

AFP, Perth

Serbian stars Jelena Jankovic and Novak Djokovic struggled against their lower-ranked opponents from Taiwan but the top seeds still prevailed 3-0 to open their Hopman Cup campaign on Sunday.

Jankovic and Djokovic, both ranked third in the world, were far from top form in their opening matches of the mixed teams' tournament, with Djokovic stretched to three sets before winning in the men's singles.

In the women's singles, Jankovic traded service breaks with the 143rd-ranked Hsieh Su-Wei throughout the match but won it in straight sets, 6-4, 6-4.

The 22-year-old Serb, who won four WTA tournaments this year

and has been training in Florida following sinus surgery, said she was disappointed with how she played and relieved to emerge with a win.

"She played quite well and it was my first match," Jankovic told reporters.

"I didn't expect to play my best tennis and I'm happy with my win. I am not that happy with the way I played, but I will just try to keep improving and get my rhythm again."

The Serbian admitted she was not match-ready following her surgery.

"I only practised for two weeks before I came here and I was on medication and I was resting," she said.

Djokovic -- who had a banner year with five tournament wins and an appearance in his first Grand Slam final before a surprise early exit from the season-ending

Masters Cup in Shanghai -- was put to the test by Lu Yen-Hsun.

The 20-year-old needed seven set points to wrap up the first set against the 103rd-ranked Lu, and needed medical treatment for stiffness in his back early in the second set.

Djokovic later explained that the problem had been sparked by his penchant for bouncing the ball repeatedly before each serve.

Lu dominated the second set, but Djokovic lifted his game and seized the early initiative in the decider to win the match, 7-5, 2-6, 6-3.

In the dead mixed doubles rubber, Jankovic and Djokovic came from a set down to win the match in a third-set tiebreak, 3-6, 6-2, 7-6 (10-8).

The Taiwanese duo qualified for the tournament in Perth by winning the Asian Hopman Cup in early November.

We were robbed: Big Sam

AFP, London



Sam Allardyce admitted he felt robbed by Salomon Kalou's controversial

late winner as Chelsea piled more pressure on the beleaguered Newcastle manager.

Kalou was at least two yards offside when he scored from close range to clinch a 2-1 win over Allardyce's side at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

The Ivory Coast striker was able to steal the points after Jon Obi Mikel's shot was deflected into his path via substitute Claudio Pizarro.

But assistant referee Mike Cairns' decision not to rule out the effort was harsh on Allardyce, who was already feeling the heat after failing to beat struggling Derby and Wigan.

"It's one of those decisions I wouldn't mind getting into trouble for to be honest, but that would cost me money and I don't want to part with money when I don't deserve it," said Allardyce.

"As a manager you can't say what you really think, you have to keep that bottled up inside you. There's no real excuse when the assistant referee sees it again."

"It hurts deeply for everybody

at the club, particularly the players. A result has been taken away from us through no fault of our own, but by an assistant referee who has got a horrible decision wrong."

"Unfortunately we have to take it on the chin as it can not be changed, but it is a severe blow to our confidence."

Allardyce made it clear after this latest defeat that he is a supporter of television replays, but Chelsea manager Avram Grant will be pleased the technology has not been introduced.

Within moments of the goal being scored, it was clear from the screens inside the stadium that it should not have stood.

As Grant spoke afterwards he claimed not to have seen a replay of the winning strike, and instead chose to praise his under-strength side for producing a victory that lifts them closer to the top of the table.

Ten Chelsea players were missing at Stamford Bridge, including suspended pair Ashley Cole and Ricardo Carvalho, as well as key stars Frank Lampard, John Terry, Andriy Shevchenko and Petr Cech.

"I think we deserved to win this game anyway," Grant said. "I think we are always in the picture for the championship race but given the situation, sometimes it is not easy."

"I think you saw the spirit of the team today. I prefer to speak of players who were with us today, but of course I wish all of our big players were with us."

"I don't want them to be out injured but it is out of my control. We need to do our best without them and we scored two goals and won the game so I am happy."

Newcastle goalkeeper Shay Given made two good first half saves to deny Kalou and Mikel, before Chelsea made their breakthrough on 29 minutes. Michael Essien was able to tap home after a Shaun Wright-Phillips shot deflected into his path.

Their lead was almost doubled either side of half-time, as Wright-Phillips headed wide, and then Given made an instinctive save to stop a Nicky Butt clearance from finding his own net.

Newcastle levelled against the run of play on 55 minutes. Charles N'Zogbia drilled a ball across the area and Butt was able to bundle the ball over the line under pressure from Wayne Bridge.

The game was then decided in controversial fashion on 87 minutes thanks to Kalou and the linesman. While Newcastle will feel hard done by, Chelsea can look forward to the New Year's Day trip to Fulham as a chance to move closer to the top of the league.

Modric not moving

AFP, Zagreb

Croatian midfielder star Luka Modric will stick with champions Dinamo Zagreb for another year, the club said Saturday.

There had been speculation that the 22-year-old would leave for England after recent talks with Manchester City, Chelsea, Tottenham and Arsenal.

But his manager and Dinamo vice-president Zdravko Mamic told journalists: "Luka Modric will stay with Dinamo until January 2009, and will earn 3 million euro (4.4m dollars) in the next year."

"We have turned down all offers of interested clubs, none of which was less than 50 million euros."

"We decided to keep Modric because we don't want to give up our goal to play in some European Cup in spring 2009."

Al Qahtani turns down City move

AFP, Manchester

Asian Player of the Year Yasser Al Qahtani revealed he has turned down an offer to join English Premier League club Manchester City.

The Saudi Arabia striker had been on trial with Sven-Goran Eriksson's side but has opted to stay in his home country with Al Hilal.

"I had a successful trial with Manchester City and I was given great praise from everyone there including coach Sven-Goran Eriksson," said 25-year-old Al Qahtani.

"We had reached an agreement but there were some issues in the contract that were not resolved."

"However, the reason I rejected the offer was not due to financial reasons but because I feel Al Hilal need me too much this season."

Al Qahtani insisted he still has ambitions to play in Europe in the near future.

He added: "I'm still looking to play in Europe and the situation could be different at the start of next season."

"I still have some offers and I will discuss them with the administration and I'm sure that I can succeed in Europe."

Redknapp mystified

INTERNET, undated

Harry Redknapp denies Portsmouth's Fratton Park goal drought is down to his side's African contingent having one eye on national glory - or that his entire team's confidence has been frozen by failure to perform at home.

Following their 1-0 defeat by Middlesbrough Pompey have now gone nine hours without a Premier League goal on their own ground - a run of six consecutive games since Sulley Muntari's 90th-minute penalty completed a 7-4 romp against Reading.

Redknapp insists his side will find their form again but admits he could be struggling to raise a squad next month when Muntari, Kanu, John Utaka and Papa Bouba Diop go off to the African Nations Cup in Ghana - taking them out of domestic football for up to six matches.

But asked if the quartet players were distracted by international ambitions, Redknapp said: "Not a chance. They have been fantastic, these players. But you need a squad. You're always looking to improve."

Daum still dreams of Germany

AFP, Berlin

German coach Christoph Daum admitted Sunday that he still dreams of leading the national side, seven years after he was set to take over but had to step aside because he was found to have used cocaine.

"Being (Germany) coach is a dream which I still have," Daum told Bild am Sonntag.

"I've been approached by teams recently - Poland, Serbia, South Africa, the United States, but I turned them all down," said Daum, currently coach of second division Cologne.

The former Bayer Leverkusen, Stuttgart, Fenerbahce and Besiktas coach has a reputation for controversy, but insisted that was all in the past.

"I made a mistake, I admitted this error and I dealt with it," he added.

Current Germany coach Joachim Loew is under contract until the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Fergie accepts defeat

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson offered no excuses after seeing Manchester United slip to a dramatic 2-1 defeat at West Ham.

United were 13 minutes away from extending their lead at the top of the English Premier League on Saturday when two expert headers from Anton Ferdinand and Matthew Upson turned a pulsating encounter on its head and sent the champions spinning to just their third league loss of the season.

It was no more than West Ham deserved for a fine performance and Ferguson - who was unable to field Wayne Rooney or Michael Carrick at Upton Park due to illness - was at a loss to explain his team's lacklustre display.

"I have no complaints," he said. "You are going to get hard days in a title race and this was a hard day for us. It's hard to say why it happened. You can't be perfect all the time. We were pretty perfect at Sunderland on Wednesday but it didn't happen for us against West Ham."

"The team struggled. West Ham were very competitive and aggressive, tackling everywhere, very motivated in what was pretty much their biggest game of the season. They wanted to beat us."

"It's a disappointment because I always feel that if you go into the New Year top of the table then you have a great chance. But we still have a very good opportunity to go on in January."

Ferguson's demeanour suggested another non-performance against Birmingham on New Year's Day will simply not be tolerated, although for all their travails at Upton Park, this was still a game United could have won.

They were handed a gilt-edged opportunity to open up a daunting two-goal lead in the 65th minute when Jonathan Spector inexplicably handled Cristiano Ronaldo's teasing cross.

The Portuguese, who had already put his team ahead in the 13th minute by neatly heading in Ryan Giggs' near-post cross, swaggered to the spot but his kick was snatched and the shot rolled well wide.

It was, as Alan Curbishley, the West Ham manager, observed, the game's pivotal incident.

"That was a big miss," he said. "It's the first time I have seen Ronaldo try and hit a penalty hard - usually he goes for placement but it was power this time. I was surprised to see him miss it and it was obviously a crucial moment."

West Ham had already been offered encouragement from a first-half display which saw Hayden Mullins strike the crossbar and Mark Noble miss the

rebound with an open goal gaping, but Ronaldo's aberration offered fresh momentum just when defeat seemed inevitable.

They duly poured forward in search of an equaliser and, in the 77th minute, it arrived when Ferdinand, returning to action after a lengthy injury lay-off and a court case, headed in Noble's pinpoint corner.

That set up a grandstand finale and, with the noise levels in east London threatening to shoot off the scale, the home fans were handed the winner they craved when another excellent Noble set-piece was headed into the top corner by the soaring Upson.

"It's a fantastic result for us," Curbishley added. "We had 16 players today and I've ended the game with 14, so it's a huge effort from everyone. I'm just really pleased for the players."

Ferguson had no such consolation. This was a rare off-day for his previously all-conquering side and a riotous afternoon delivered yet more compelling proof that this season's league title race will be the most keenly-contested in years.

"If we had scored the penalty it probably would have been game over but, even so, I couldn't see West Ham coming back," Ferguson said. "But to concede two goals from set-pieces proves you are not at your best. It's just disappointing."

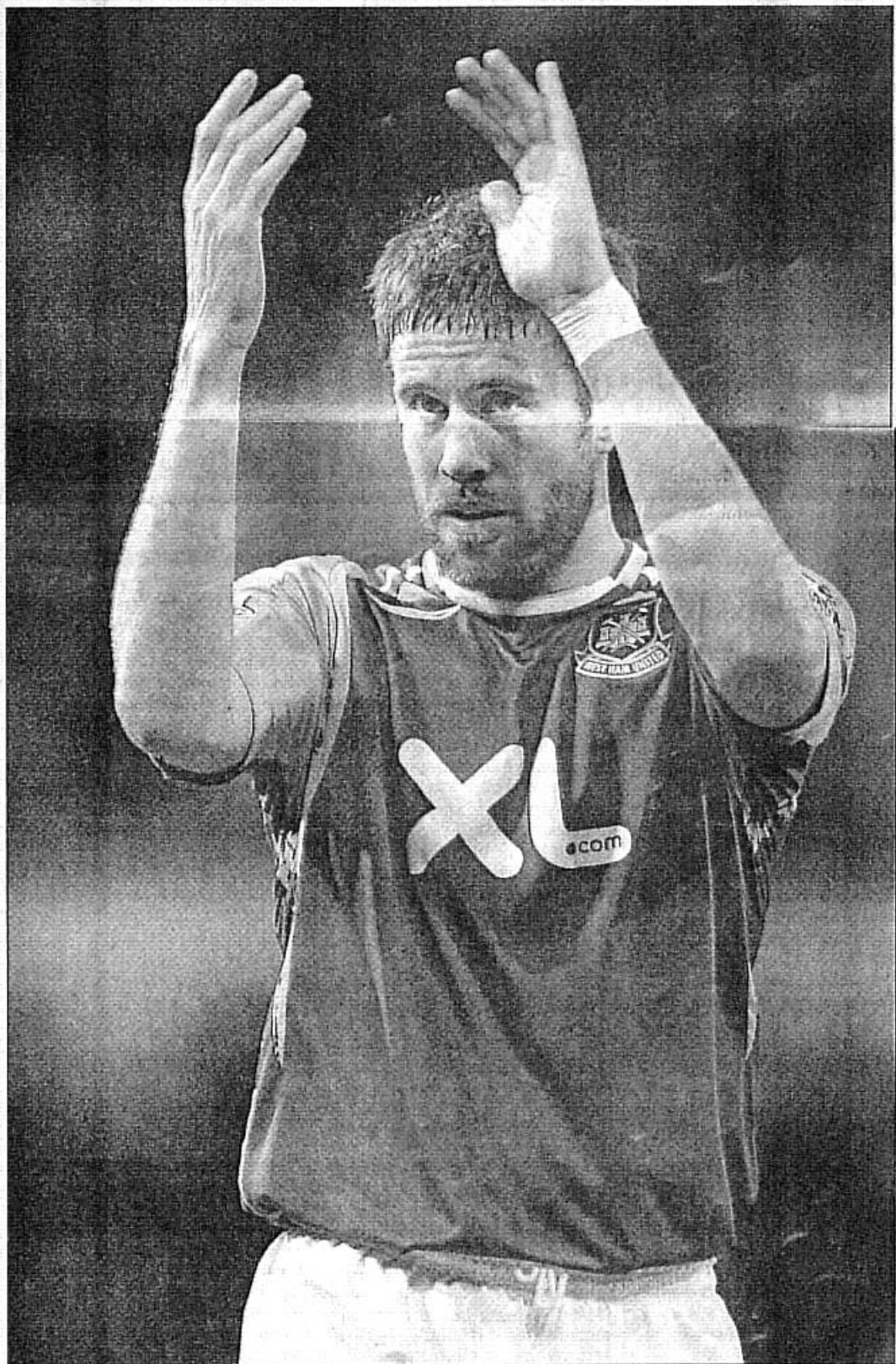


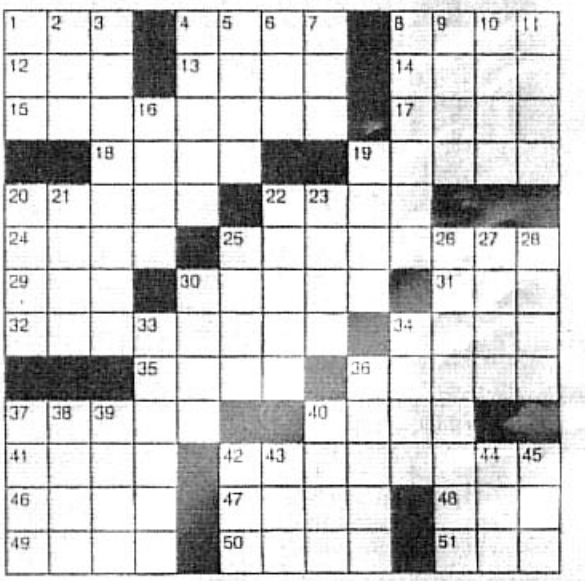
PHOTO: AFP

West Ham defender Matthew Upson enjoys his moment in the limelight after netting a late winner to beat Manchester United in their Premiership encounter at Upton Park on Saturday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS
1 Longing
4 Sow's mate
6 Passel
12 Ring
13 Incite
14 Military cap
15 Hodge-podge
17 Satan's speciality
18 Probability
19 Doubly
20 Peter Pan's girl
22 Angry
24 La Scala show-stopper
25 Invalida-tion
29 Genetic abbr.
30 Carnes back
31 Altar
32 The Charge of the Light Brigade poet
34 Ice skating leap
35 Tourney format
36 Revive a membership

DOWN
1 Sweet potato
2 Quarterback
3 Manned
4 Podrida
5 Blow, Big Bad
6 Wolf-style
7 Gas pump
8 City of Invention
9 Jeans maker
10 Grand
11 Scullery
12 Biting
13 Icelandic saga
14 Uno, dos, tres
15 Imperfection
16 Sea eagle
17 Kinky hairdo
18 The yoke's on them
19 Hammar-skold of U.N. fame
20 Lermieux milieu
21 Its cap, is Abu Dhabi
22 Chart format



CRYPTOQUIP

EWDFX S VWTYV-ZQOYJ
EYQVL ELW HFYRZ HSZQRO
QLSM QLR ZJRRX WH ZWDMX
IR MSTRX IWWT-LYFXS?
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN MANY KILLER WHALES ARE MAKING SOUNDS TOGETHER, COULD YOU SAY THAT'S ORCA-STRAITON?
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: W equals O