



Manchester City defender Richard Dunne (L) clears the ball off the line after a header from Liverpool forward Dirk Kuyt (C) was saved by City goalkeeper Joe Hart (on the ground) during their Premiership encounter at The City of Manchester Stadium on Sunday.

Hart denies L'pool

AFP, Manchester



Manchester City goalkeeper Joe Hart produced an 86th minute wonder save to deny Dirk Kuyt a late winner for Liverpool as the two challengers for Champions League qualification fought out a tense 0-0 draw at Eastlands here on Sunday.

Hart, 20, has been confirmed ahead of Sweden international Andreas Isaksson as first-choice goalkeeper at City by manager Sven Goran Eriksson and the youngster showed why with a terrific reflex save to keep out Kuyt's close range header towards the end of this Premier League match.

But for the goalkeeper's heroics, Liverpool would have left Manchester with a victory that they barely deserved after being frustrated by the home side throughout this absorbing encounter.

Instead they had to settle for a draw that left them 10 points behind league leaders Arsenal heading into the New Year.

Unbeaten in the league until mid-December, successive defeats against Reading and Manchester United had put Liverpool, fourth and a point ahead of their hosts, off the title pace and this clash with fifth-placed City was a stern test of their credentials for a top four finish.

Under former England manager Eriksson, City have emerged as a surprise contender for a Champions League spot and their success has been built on a formidable home record which had seen them win nine and draw one of their league games at home this season prior to the visit of Rafa Benitez's team.

And the confidence generated by that unbeaten run was evident in the first-half as City took the initiative in a cagey affair, with both teams wary of making the first mistake.

The home side's three-man midfield behind lone striker Darius Vassell kept Liverpool penned back in their own half for long periods, but the chances they created were never of the clear-cut kind likely to test goalkeeper Jose Reina.

Each time City broke forward, their attacking forays crashed against a red wall of Jamie Carragher and Alvaro Arbeloa at the heart of the Liverpool defence and chances for Elano, Vassell and Stiliyan Petrov were all snuffed out by the visitors' defenders.

With the muscular Richard Dunne and Micah Richards giving Liverpool striker Fernando Torres a bruising afternoon, Benitez's team struggled to get their 26 million pounds poured into goalscoring positions.

But the Spaniard's pace was always a threat and, with Liverpool content to wait to hit City on the counter-attack, the suspicion was that Torres would get behind his markers at some stage.

And with Liverpool starting the second-half at a rapid tempo, the breakthrough appeared inevitable, but a five minute spell quickly fizzled out to nothing, despite two glorious chances in the space of a minute for Torres.

The first came in the 48th minute when Fabio Aurelio's cross into the penalty area beat Richards at the near post and was dummied by Kuyt for Torres 12 yards out. But the former Atletico Madrid star saw his close range effort blocked.

A better chance came to Torres sixty seconds later when Steven Gerrard's through ball released him in the area, but the striker's chipped effort bounced agonisingly wide of the post.

When Richards conceded a free-kick on the edge of the area two minutes later following a clumsy foul on Torres, Gerrard had the perfect opportunity to score from 20 yards.

But in keeping with the game, the England midfielder's set-piece was close, but not close enough to open the scoring and give Liverpool what would have been a priceless victory.

Rui Costa to quit

AFP, Lisbon

Benfica's former Portuguese international Rui Costa revealed Monday that he will retire at the end of the season.

The 35-year-old midfielder said that he always intended to end his career with Benfica, the club where he began his professional career in 1991.

"I would have liked to leave the club proud of what I achieved ... and for what I achieved to be appreciated, and for me to be recognised as a good professional," he told the daily Record.

And he admitted that he would like to continue with the Portuguese giants in a coaching capacity.

"At Benfica I see myself in the job of sporting director. (I) need to continue to smell the odour of the locker rooms.

"But I still have four months left before hanging up my boots."

Rui Costa, who had 96 caps for the national side, retired from international football after Euro 2004, where hosts Portugal lost in the final to Greece.

After Benfica (1991-94) he played in Italy with Fiorentina (1994-2001), then AC Milan until 2006.

He returned to Benfica last year but was sidelined for long periods injured. The club are currently second in the league seven-points behind FC Porto.

Barton let me down: Big Sam

AFP, London

Under-fire Newcastle manager Sam Allardyce on Monday blasted controversial midfielder Joey Barton for letting him down.

Barton will see in 2008 in prison after being charged with common assault and affray following an incident in Liverpool over the Christmas period.

And Magpies boss Allardyce, who spent out 5.8 million pounds to take the midfielder to St James' Park, revealed his frustration at Barton's behaviour.

He told the Daily Mirror: "Yes, I feel let down by him, of course I do. There's no question about that but I've got to deal with that quietly and privately when the opportunity arises."

Allardyce has spoken to Barton since he was remanded in custody but insists his future at Newcastle has not been discussed.

"I have spoken to him but I'm not going to tell you what was said. The Joey Barton situation is something we've got to put behind us because we've got so many games in such a short period of time," said Allardyce.

"We'll deal with that later on and find out what the outcome is when I get the opportunity with the chairman."

"It's disappointing, very, very disappointing but I can't really comment any further than that."

New Year test for Gunners

AFP, London



The turn of the year can be both an inspiring and a daunting time for English Premier League clubs as they reach the end of a congested holiday fixture programme and contemplate the challenges that lie ahead in the second-half of the season.

Someone who opts for the positive outlook is Sir Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager.

Rather than share any shred of self-doubt, Ferguson, 66 on Monday, prefers to play mind games with United's title rivals.

The reigning champions' surprise 2-1 defeat away to West Ham, combined with Arsenal's 4-1 victory at Everton, means it is the Gunners, not Ferguson's men, who start 2008 with a two-point lead at the top of the table.

And Ferguson did his best to up the pressure on the Londoners by saying: "I always feel if you reach New Year on top you have a massive chance."

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, whose team are at home to West Ham United on New Year's Day on Tuesday, sees no reason why their 'beautiful game' cannot be a winning game as well.

"We want to win and play the football we love," the Frenchman said. "I am convinced that is the best way for us."

But one of the enduring attractions of the Premier League is that although the 'Big Four' of Arsenal, United, Chelsea and Liverpool have a strong grip on the top spots, any side can beat any other on a given day, as West Ham proved last weekend.

"There are no gimmicks in this league," said Hammers boss Alan Curbishley. "That's what makes it so tough."

United are at home to

Birmingham City, one of several Premier League clubs managed by a former Ferguson player, only Alex McLeish got to know his fellow Scot not at Old Trafford but at Pittodrie where they were both forging their reputations with Aberdeen in the 1980s.

January now features the mid-season transfer window, a potential lifeline for struggling sides.

It also offers a way for teams such as Portsmouth, who are about to lose several first-choice players to the African Nations Cup, to bolster their soon to be depleted squads.

Pompey are away to Reading, whom they beat 7-4 earlier in the season. But since that extraordinary match at Fratton Park in September, Portsmouth haven't scored a home league goal - a run stretched to six matches with Middlesbrough's 1-0 win last weekend - and have dropped out of the top six.

Sulley Muntari, Kanu, John Utaka and Papa Bouba Diop are all set to go to Ghana for African Nations duty and Pompey boss Harry Redknapp, renowned for his transfer expertise, is keen to bring in a new forward.

"To find strikers is not easy and that is the area I do feel we are a bit short," Redknapp said.

Reading will hope the Madejski Stadium offers some home comfort against their southern rivals after last weekend again saw them

score four goals on their travels and lose, this time in a 6-4 reverse at Tottenham.

"I feel a bit of an idiot because I said after the Portsmouth game 'that only happens once in a blue moon'," said Reading striker Dave Kitson, who scored twice at White Hart Lane. "It must be a blue moon again."

New Fulham manager Roy Hodgson, the bulk of whose career has been spent overseas, including spells with Inter Milan and Malmo, starts his time in charge of the second-bottom Cottagers at home to third-placed Chelsea in a west London derby.

Tuesday's other fixtures see improving Aston Villa at home to Tottenham with Spurs fans hoping Dimitar Berbatov, their four-goal hero against Reading won't be leaving them during the transfer window despite the striker being linked with a move to United, while Middlesbrough are at home to Everton.

Many Newcastle fans would love to be in the position of fifth-placed Manchester City, another club long-starved of success but with a large, passionate following.

But the Toon Army appear to be losing faith with manager Sam Allardyce for whom a win on Wednesday over City would be especially timely.

Liverpool, yet to be crowned champions in the Premier League era, could be 13 points off top spot by the time they kick-off at Anfield against Wigan.

Sunderland, fresh from a 3-1 victory over Bolton, continue their fight against relegation away to Blackburn, who beat basement club Derby by the same scoreline last weekend.

The Rams travel to Bolton, whose star striker Nicolas Anelka could be tempted by a transfer window move from the Reebok Stadium.

Berbatov looking to move

AFP, London

Bulgarian striker Dimitar Berbatov wants to leave Tottenham if a suitable offer comes in during the January transfer window, his agent said Monday.

The striker has rediscovered his stunning form for Spurs in recent weeks and fired four goals in the 6-4 win over Reading on Saturday.

And his agent Emil Dantchev claims the player is keen to join a team with greater trophy-winning potential than the north Londoners.

Dantchev told The Sun: "I have already spoken to the Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy and told him that if a club which corresponds to Dimitar's class and ambition comes in with an offer which suits his current club in January, he would like to be allowed to go."

"I would like to stress this is not about money, this is about sporting ambition, nor has it anything to do with the new manager Juande Ramos. Dimitar is perfectly happy with Ramos and the way he is working but after Tottenham's bad start to the season it is unlikely they will have the chance to do something big this season."

Manchester United have been linked with Berbatov in the past, but Spurs have always been firm in stating he is not for sale.

Dantchev added: "Dimitar is OK at Tottenham. I would not say he is happy but his performances for the club are a testament to his commitment to the fans and his teammates. He has never stopped trying and scoring goals to help the team."

"Fans must understand Dimitar is 27 next month and time is running out for him to play for a club which can match his ambition."

"It is a long-term plan for Spurs. Dimitar wants to fulfil his potential and win trophies now. He would definitely consider a move outside of England that is not the issue. What matters is a club which matches his ambition and his level, and therefore there are only five or six around Europe. Two clubs outside of England and one from the Premier League are interested in him."

Heskey set for return

AFP, London

Wigan's England striker Emile Heskey looks set to make his comeback at Liverpool on Wednesday.

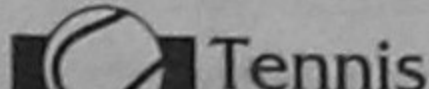
Heskey has been plagued by injury this season and has missed the Latics entire festive programme so far with a sprained ankle.

But manager Steve Bruce confirmed the former Liverpool star will train Monday and is hopeful Heskey will be available for the trip to Anfield.

"I expect Emile to be fit," said Bruce.

"We have to see how he trains over the next couple of days and obviously, with the injuries he has sustained, it will be vital we don't rush him too much."

Nadal wants Olympic title



AFP, Chennai

World number two Rafael Nadal wants to win the Olympic title at Beijing, but has distanced himself from trying to topple Swiss champion Roger Federer on the pedestal.

The feisty Spaniard, 21, who is set to defend the 436,000-dollar ATP Chennai Open starting here on Monday, said he was excited about 2008 because of the Olympic Games in August.

"This year there is special significance because of the Olympic Games," Nadal told reporters ahead of the season-opening event in the southern Indian city of Chennai.

"Olympics is just behind the four Grand Slams. The Davis Cup is also there, but importantly the Olympics comes once in four years."

"It is a special tournament, special motivation."

Nadal, ranked second behind Federer for the third year in a row, said he was not working himself into frenzy in trying to grab the number one position.

"I would love to be number two for 50 more years," said Nadal, who finished 2007 with 5,735 ATP ranking points against Federer's 7,180.

"(Getting) 5,600 or 5,700 points, that is a lot," he said. "In a normal moment in the history of tennis, I'd have been number one."

"I'm not worried about Roger, he is better than the other guys at the moment. But a lot of young guys are coming from behind at the present time."

Nadal won six titles in 2007, including the French Open, and forced Federer into a five-set thriller in the Wimbledon final.

But the loss in the quarterfinals at the Australian Open and could not get past the fourth round at the US Open.

"It is difficult to play better," said Nadal. "I played very well on grass, clay and indoors too."

Alloudi pens \$1m deal

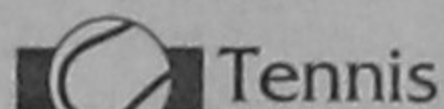
AFP, Rabat

Rising Moroccan star Soufiane Alloudi revealed Monday that he has signed a three-year deal worth one-million dollars with Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates.

The 24-year-old striker has been loaned to the club for the past four months from Raja Casablanca. His new deal runs until January 2011.

"I have been playing for Al Ain who were to sign me if they were convinced by my showing, which was the case," Alloudi told the Assabah weekly on Monday.

Serena spearheads win



AFP, Perth

Serena Williams shrugged off her jet lag to lead the United States to a 3-0 victory over the Czech Republic at the Hopman Cup mixed teams tennis tournament on Monday.

Little more than 24 hours after stepping off a marathon flight to Perth, the seventh-ranked Williams opened her season with a three-set win over Lucie Safarova, and said she still had the desire to regain the top world ranking.

"Of course, I want to be number one and I want to win Grand Slams," said Williams, who has already won eight Grand Slam titles.

"I wouldn't be out there if I didn't have those goals."

Williams thrashed Safarova in the first set 6-0 thanks to her big serves and powerful ground strokes. But she lost her range in the second and the 23rd-ranked Safarova fought back, forcing a deciding third set.

The 26-year-old American's experience then came into play, and she showed her trademark grit to secure victory 6-0, 2-6, 7-5.

The Group B tie was decided when an ailing Tomas Berdych was forced to withdraw from the mixed doubles against Williams and partner Mardy Fish, giving the United States an unbeatable 2-0 lead.

Fish was given a walkover in the men's singles, completing the 3-0 sweep.

The Americans are now in prime position to reach Friday's final, having beaten India in their opening tie on Saturday when Meghanna Shaughnessy filled in for Williams, who delayed her arrival here due to illness.

Williams, who held the top ranking for 57 consecutive weeks in 2002-03, dropped to a career-low ranking of 140 in mid-2006 and started 2007 ranked 95th.

She began her climb back up the WTA rankings in January by claiming her third Australian Open title, thrashing Russia's Maria Sharapova in the final.

Commentators have often questioned Williams' commitment to the game, as acting, modelling and charity work have sometimes diverted her attention.

While she conceded she faced a tough task to dislodge Belgian ace Justine Henin at the top of the rankings, she said her determination should not be underestimated and was more confident in her game than 12 months ago.

"I love challenges and I do best when I'm faced with one," she told reporters.

"Last year I wasn't even in the top 60 and now I'm in the top 10."

Tennis legend Martina Navratilova watched Williams' singles match and said she had never seen her in better physical condition.

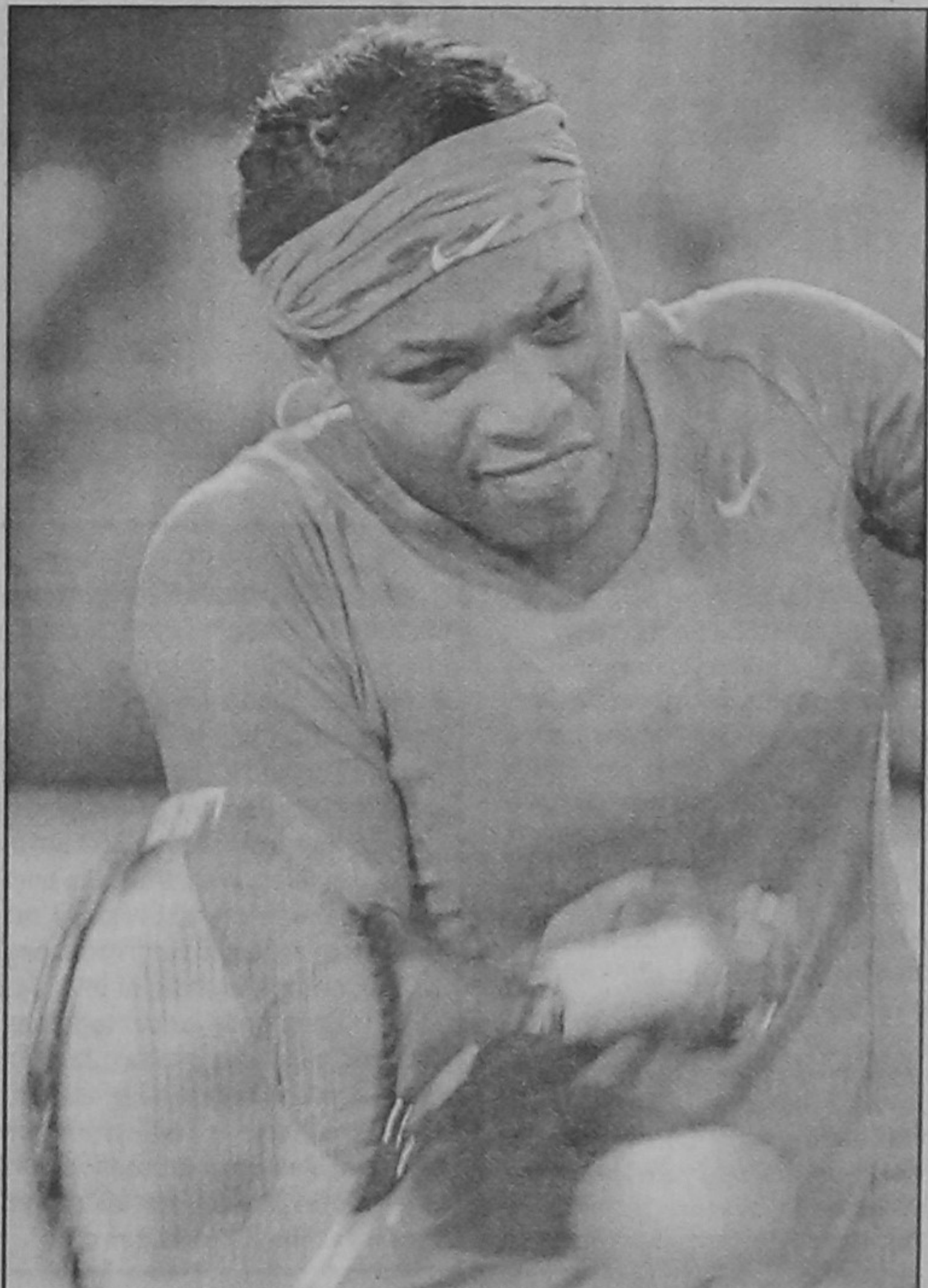
In the third set, the 20-year-old Safarova was up a break leading 4-2 and had a game point on her own serve for a 5-2 lead.

But Williams broke back to 4-3 and broke again in the 11th game when Safarova pushed a forehand wide for 6-5, before serving the match out.

Williams -- who teamed with James Blake to win the Hopman Cup in 2003 -- said she was disappointed with her form, but pleased to post a win.

"Lucie's a very good player -- I wasn't feeling really motivated and I felt like I wasn't moving at all," Williams said.

"I was able to pick up my game at the right time. She had a chance to go 5-2, and I was able to bring it through. That is really satisfying and very pleasing."



US star Serena Williams makes a forehand return against Lucie Safarova of the Czech Republic during their singles match of the Hopman Cup in Perth on Monday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS
 1 Cry loudly
 5 Stomped (on)
 9 Pump up the volume
 12 Stead earner
 13 Medal
 14 Spelling contest
 15 Leading man of the foot
 17 George's brother
 18 KFC flavorer
 19 To the degree
 20 Indulge in mockery
 21 Early bird?
 23 Believer?
 25 Decks the halls?
 28 One who doesn't treat anyone well?
 32 'Deliverance' dueler
 33 Gilaite's kin

DOWN
 1 Mediciore
 2 Staffer
 3 Sport carrier
 4 One with an ax
 5 Thrill to grind?
 6 Dollars
 7 for quarters
 7 Corsage
 8 Homer's "Phooyai"
 9 Rose's lover
 10 Unembellished
 11 Bartlett, e.g.
 20 Mischievous
 22 Travelocity mascot
 24 Bread
 25 "The View"
 26 -- as Salaam
 27 Inseparable
 29 High-lander's hat
 30 Unclose, in verse
 31 Disoncumber
 35 Hay-seeds
 36 Feet
 39 Recognized
 40 Corn territory
 41 Acceptability, for short
 43 Edwardian and Elizabethan
 45 Colonel Mustard's game
 46 Injury
 47 Some divas have huge ones
 49 With it, once

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		
12				13				14				
15				16				17				
18				19				20				
			21	22			23	24				
25	26	27					28	29	30	31		
32							33					
34							35	36				
			37					38				
39	40	41				42	43		44	45	46	47
48						49					50	
51						52					53	
54						55					56	

CRYPTOQUIP

REVXNZS ZIPEF HPSLV CWP
 ZQG AGJPFGGV PH JGQAX
 ZUA DENNXUX CPQLV :
 "HZUAPR PH FWG PDGQZ."
 Yesterday's Cryptquip: WOULD A COMIC-STRIP WITCH WHO FLIES FASTER THAN THE SPEED OF SOUND BE NAMED BOOM-HILDA?
 Today's Cryptquip Clue: H equals F