

HOPMAN CUP
USA win
fifth title

AFP, Perth

The United States capitalised on Jelena Jankovic's injury misfortune to beat Serbia 2-1 in the final and win their fourth Hopman Cup in six years here on Friday.

Aided by a one match headstart in the final after Jankovic, battling a right thigh injury, forfeited her singles match, Serena Williams and Mardy Fish claimed the title with a straight sets win in the deciding mixed doubles clash, 7-6 (7/5), 6-2.

That win came after Novak Djokovic had levelled the tie with a three-set win over a brave Fish in the men's singles, 6-2, 6-7 (4/7) 7-6 (7/4).

For the third day in a row a hobbling Jankovic played in a deciding mixed doubles rubber with heavy strapping on her injured right leg, but it was third time unlucky for her and Djokovic as they squandered a good start and succumbed to the Americans.

The Serbs looked on track for an upset win when they raced to a 4-1 lead in the first set, but the superior fitness of the Americans started to tell and they worked their way back into the contest.

Djokovic and Jankovic, who is ranked number three in the world, were clearly feeling the effects of their third tie in as many days and the Americans took the first set on a tie-break and then dominated the second set.

Fish sealed the victory with a backhand pass to break the Jankovic serve and end the match after one hour and 25 minutes.

Djokovic received treatment on his shoulder, which has been troubling him all week, after dropping the second set and admitted he considered retiring.

"I wasn't really sure if I was going to be able to continue," he said.

"But whenever you are on the court you want to win and you could see that today."

Realising her body would only last one match, Jankovic had elected to skip the singles and take her chances in the mixed doubles, which in turn relied on Djokovic to keep his end of the deal.

It was the United States' fifth win here overall and Fish's first Hopman Cup success, while Williams teamed up with James Blake to win the title in 2003.

In her two appearances here, Williams is yet to play in a losing rubber.

Hingis banned
for two years

AFP, London

The International Tennis Federation announced on Friday that former world No.1 Martina Hingis would be banned for two years for failing a doping test.

Hingis tested positive for cocaine on June 29 at Wimbledon and although the Swiss player denied she had taken the drug an independent Anti-Doping Tribunal after a two-day hearing found that she had committed an offence.

The two-year ban is effective from October 1, but the 27-year-old Hingis has already announced her retirement from the sport.

Speculation
mounts over
Lehmann

AFP, Berlin

Speculation has mounted over Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann's possible move to Borussia Dortmund after the German club called a press conference for Friday.

The club's owners have yet to disclose any details concerning the conference, but according to the German press an announcement that the 38-year-old shotstopper will return to the club, where he spent four years between the posts from 1999 to 2003, is very likely.

Club owner, Hans-Joachim Watzke, and his sporting director Michael Zorn fuelled speculation following a trip to London for supposed talks with the player on Thursday, according to the media.

Lehmann, whose contract with the Gunners ends in June, has been out of Arsenal's first team since losing his place to Spaniard Manuel Almunia in September.

And as Germany's first-choice goalkeeper, Lehmann is under pressure to play regular football ahead of this year's European Championships in Austria and Switzerland.

But Arsenal's French coach Arsene Wenger gave no indication that he has agreed to sell his veteran keeper.

Speaking on Thursday ahead of Arsenal's FA Cup third round tie at Burnley this weekend, he told the club's website: "I think Jens Lehmann will be involved."

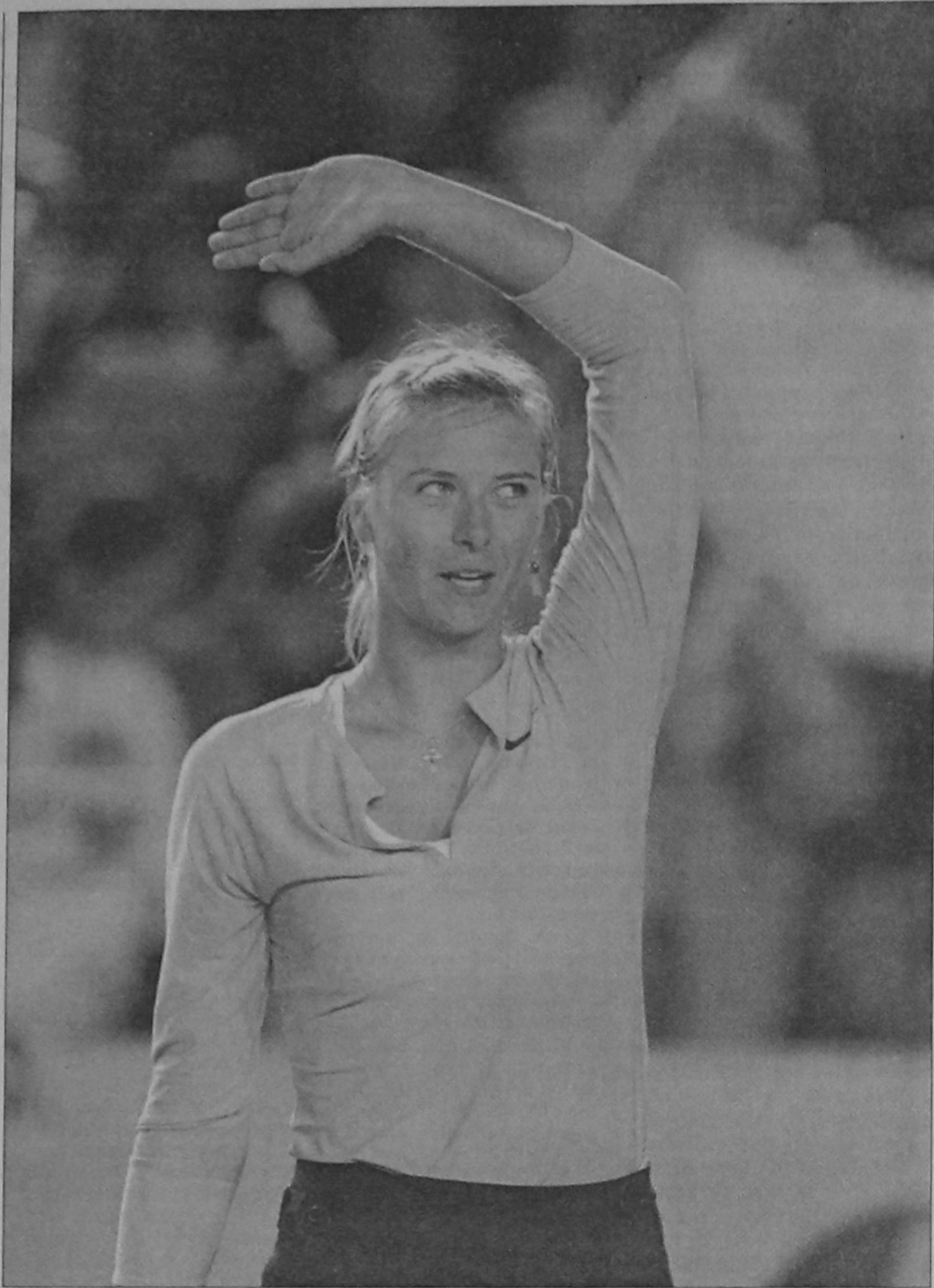


PHOTO: AFP

Russian star Maria Sharapova is all-smiles after beating compatriot Anna Chakvetadze in the semifinal of the JB Group Classic in Hong Kong on Friday.

Spotlight on Big Sam, Rafa

AFP, London



THE FA CUP

Sam Allardyce and Rafa Benitez could be forgiven for cursing the FA Cup as two of the Premier League's big guns prepare to put their reputations on the line this weekend.

England's world famous cup competition can be a source of inspiration but for Allardyce's Newcastle and Benitez's Liverpool it represents a potential source of embarrassment.

Newcastle are in the midst of a woeiful run that threatens to cost Allardyce his job after just half a season in charge, so the beleaguered boss could do without a tricky trip to in-form Championship club Stoke on Sunday.

A defeat at the Britannia Stadium could be the final straw for Newcastle owner Mike Ashley, who must be concerned by Allardyce's admission that morale among his players is at rock bottom.

"The players are very dejected and disappointed. It has been a massive effort with so many games in such a short period of time," Allardyce said.

"Now it is three defeats on the trot and in terms of confidence that is hugely draining. We cannot keep shooting ourselves in the foot by playing so well and not getting results to go along with it."

Berbatov priced at £30m

AFP, London

Football

AFP, London

Tottenham manager Juande Ramos has warned clubs interested in Dimitar Berbatov that it would take a British record transfer fee to sign the Bulgaria striker.

Berbatov's agent had claimed his player would be keen to leave White Hart Lane if a club in the Champions League wanted him.

That appears to be a real possibility as Chelsea have been linked with a 26 million pounds offer, while Manchester United are said to be considering a bid.

Ramos conceded that Berbatov, 26, could be sold if Tottenham receive an offer higher than the British record 30 million pounds fee that Chelsea paid AC Milan to sign Andriy Shevchenko in 2006.

"I think a club would have to break the British transfer record to sign Berbatov," Ramos said. "At this moment Berbatov's value is more than this price. At least that is what we think. But everyone has a price."

"The other clubs will know what they need for their squads. But it's normal that for a player of this level

Newcastle are fast reaching crisis point and Liverpool won't be too far behind if they lose against League One strugglers Luton on Sunday. It is a tie that has the perfect conditions for an FA Cup giant-killing.

Benitez's side are 12 points behind Arsenal after a run of two league wins in their last six games, while the Spaniard's fractious relationship with Liverpool's American owners has created uncertainly over his long-term future.

FIXTURES	
Saturday (1500GMT unless stated)	
Aston Villa v Manchester Utd (1715GMT), Barnsley v Blackpool, Blackburn v Coventry, Bolton v Sheffield Utd, Brighton v Mansfield, Bristol City v Middlesbrough, Charlton v West Bromwich, Chasetown v Cardiff (1300GMT), Chelsea v QPR, Colchester v Peterborough, Everton v Oldham, Huddersfield v Birmingham, Ipswich v Portsmouth, Norwich v Bury, Plymouth v Hull, Preston v Scunthorpe, Southampton v Leicester, Southend v Dagenham and Redbridge, Sunderland v Wigan, Swansea v Havant and Waterlooville, Swindon v Barne, Tottenham v Reading, Tranmere v Hereford, Walsall v Millwall, Watford v Crystal Palace, West Ham v Manchester City, Wolverhampton v Cambridge Utd	
Sunday (1400GMT unless stated)	
Burnley v Arsenal, Derby v Sheffield Wednesday, Fulham v Bristol Rovers, Luton v Liverpool (1600GMT), Stoke v Newcastle (1800GMT)	

The cramped confines of Kenilworth Road and an opponent with nothing to lose will test Liverpool's desire but Benitez is confident their luck will turn soon.

"I do not think there is a lack of confidence, we need more luck and to score the chances we are creating. We are creating chances but not taking them," he said.

Middlesbrough, who face Championship joint-leaders Bristol City at Ashton Gate, are another Premier League team with reason to fear a cup exit.

Arsenal are likely to play several reserves at Burnley so even they can't be certain of success. But Chelsea's formidable home record should insulate them from a shock against west London rivals QPR.

Aston Villa striker Gabriel Agbonlahor admits his side are desperate to finally get the better of Manchester United at Villa Park.

Villa have been knocked out of the cup by United three times in the last six seasons and haven't beaten Sir Alex Ferguson's team since 1999.

Agbonlahor said: "We know we have a poor record against United especially at home, but we've got to go out there, try our hardest to get something from the game."

The last two non-league teams in the competition both face Welsh opposition.

Chasetown, who play four levels below the Football League, are the lowest ranked team left and host Championship club Cardiff, while Conference South outfit Havant and Waterlooville travel to League One Swansea.

Following Michael Carrick's move to Manchester United in 2006, they cannot afford to lose another key player if they want to be taken seriously as contenders for major honours.

"That is a logical deduction," Ramos said. "So our intention is not to sell Berbatov and we don't want to. What's more we want to sign good players."

"I fully expect that at the end of January I will have all my four strikers. At this moment I am convinced they will continue with us because we want them to."

Emerson new Santos coach

AFP, Sao Paulo

Former Brazil goalkeeper Emerson was on Thursday named coach of first division club Santos in place of Wanderley Luxemburgo.

Emerson has also previously coached other big Brazilian clubs Corinthians, Sao Paulo and Palmeiras. Santos finished second in the Brazilian championship behind Sao Paulo.

Bayern eyeing
Mourinho

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer would welcome Jose Mourinho as the next coach of his club when Ottmar Hitzfeld leaves in the summer.

The former Chelsea and Porto boss is one of the leading candidates to assume control of the Bavarians, although the fact he does not speak German could rule him out of the running.

However, Beckenbauer feels there is enough time for Mourinho to learn the language and be ready to take the reins in six months time.

"He could do a language course between now and the summer, so why not?" Beckenbauer wrote in his column in Germany's Bild newspaper.

"Our club needs a big name. He has got to be a great tactician, have already accumulated experience and have command of the German language."

One man who does have such a CV is Beckenbauer himself, who has already led Bayern and Germany to glory in the 1990s.

However, the 62-year-old will not be putting forward his own candidacy this time.

"The only person I can really rule out of the running is myself," he added.

Scholes closing
on return

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United midfielder Paul Scholes has revealed he is close to a return to action after two months out with a knee problem.

Scholes, 33, has started running again after the lateral ligament injury and believes he could be back by the end of January.

"I've got these next few weeks to get as fit as I can, so hopefully I'll be fresh when I come back," Scholes said.

"It's a couple of months since the operation now and everything seems to be okay. I'm on track to return at the end of January or the start of February."

The former England midfielder has found it hard watching from the sidelines while his teammates competed in the Premier League and Champions League.

"I know that I have to be patient and hopefully I'll be back playing soon."

Figo denies
US link

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan's former Portugal winger Luis Figo on Thursday distanced himself from a possible transfer window move to the United States, insisting he was concentrating firmly on his current club.

Figo recently admitted he would consider moving to Major League Soccer, with his former international team-mate Maniche, now at Atletico Madrid, rumoured to be heading to the Italian champions.

But Figo, who almost moved to Saudi Arabia in the last winter transfer window a year ago, insists he is staying put.

"Right now I'm not thinking about this possibility (going to the United States) because I have something else in mind," Italian news agency Ansa quoted Figo as saying from Inter's Dubai training camp.

"I have to win back my place, play and win with Inter and give my all in these next six months in the Italian championship. Then we will see what happens."

Figo also gave his backing to the potential signing of Maniche.

"He's the type of player the whole squad would like to have because he is a good player both individually and collectively."

Wise in
trouble

AFP, Leeds

Leeds manager Dennis Wise has been interviewed by police after chasing a youth who allegedly threw stones at his car on New Year's Day.

Wise was driving through Leeds city centre in the early hours of the morning with his mother-in-law, pregnant wife Claire and their two young children when his vehicle came under attack by youths.

The former Chelsea and England midfielder jumped out of his car and made an unsuccessful attempt to catch the teenager.

West Yorkshire Police confirmed a 41-year-old man and a 13-year-old youth had been interviewed in connection with the incident.

A police spokeswoman said there had been no arrests and no charges. The spokeswoman said police were investigating criminal damage to a car and also an allegation of assault by a 13-year-old boy.

A spokesman for English League One club Leeds said: "We can confirm that Dennis's vehicle was attacked. The police are investigating the matter and Dennis is cooperating fully with their investigations."

A Real show beckons

AFP, Madrid



LFP

Sunday is the traditional day in the calendar for giving presents in Spain and La Liga leaders Real Madrid will be looking to provide their fans with something special against Real Zaragoza.

The Spanish giants ended 2007 with a confidence-boosting 1-0 win at their bitter rivals Barcelona to extend their lead in the championship race to seven points and they will be looking to start this year in similar fashion.

"That was a great game and seven points is an important advantage but it's too early to start talking about the title," said Real coach Bernd Schuster, well aware that the Spanish season has not yet reached its halfway point.

Against Zaragoza, Schuster could be without one of his stars of Real's recent victories, their Brazilian-born Portuguese international defender Pepe.

Pepe has been particularly impressive in the centre of the defence alongside 2006 World Player of the Year Fabio Cannavaro but Real medical officials said on Thursday that he had still not recovered from a seasonal bout of flu.

If Pepe is unfit then Sergio Ramos may move into the centre of the defence and either Miguel Torres or Michel Salgado could be recalled at right back as Real aim to

defend their 100 percent home record in the league this season.

Gabriel Heinze suffered a thigh strain in Real's 2-1 win over third division Alicante in the Spanish Cup on Wednesday, achieved without a host of first choice players, but the Argentine international is expected to fit for Sunday.

Zaragoza have slipped to ninth after having failed to win a league game since October and coach Victor Fernandez could find himself out of a job on Monday if they notch up another loss.

Two big team worries for Fernandez are whether his first choice goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez - who played five seasons for Madrid and helped them to the 2002 Champions League title - or midfield playmaker Pablo Aimar will be fit after recent injuries.

Barcelona will be hoping to get back on track after their defeat by Real with a good performance at mid-table Real Mallorca on Saturday, although their poor away record in the league this season makes three points far from certain.

FIXTURES	
Saturday (Kick off in GMT)	
Real Mallorca v Barcelona (1900), Espanyol v Villarreal (2100)	
Sunday	
Getafe v Valladolid (1600), Murcia v Osasuna (1600), Racing Santander v Athletic Bilbao (1600), Recreativo Huelva v Almeria (1600), Valencia v Levante (1600), Deportivo La Coruna v Atletico Madrid (1600), Real Madrid v Zaragoza (1800), Sevilla v Real Betis (2000)	

The Catalan club have only won twice away from home this season but visits to Mallorca have become morale-boosting occasions for Barca in recent years, as they have inflicted heavy defeats on Mallorca in their last four trips there.

Last season, Barcelona hammered Mallorca 4-1 with two goals coming from Eidur Gudjohnsen and another from Andres Iniesta and both men might have pivotal roles to play this time around.

In the absence of their injured superstars Ronaldinho and Lionel Messi, who have tendonitis in the left knee and a muscle tear in the left thigh respectively, Iniesta could play up front alongside Samuel Eto'o.

Gudjohnsen might slot in behind the pair although Barca coach Frank Rijkaard may also opt to throw teenage striker Bojan Krkic into the action.

"I think we have got to get back to simple football. Our philosophy has to be win, win, win. And, to me, it doesn't matter how we do it," said Eto'o on Thursday.

If Barcelona drop points in Mallorca, they could find themselves in the embarrassing position of losing their status as the top club in the city as their neighbours Espanyol are only one point and one place behind them.

Espanyol, who have 33 points, play host to fourth-placed Villarreal on Saturday in a match that could also determine who is Real's closest competitor by the end of the weekend as Villarreal are only one point further back.

Donadoni waves
off allegations

Football

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Roberto Donadoni dismissed speculation that he is under pressure to pick certain players in an interview due to be transmitted on Euronews from Friday night.

Italian news agency Ansa was on Thursday given a sneak preview into the interview due to be shown on the France-based television news channel between 2145 (2045 GMT) and 2345 from Friday to Sunday.

In it Donadoni also talks about his feud with France coach Raymond Domenech and his opinions on new England boss

Fabio Capello.

"I've never been put under pressure to pick certain players for the national team. If I did it would not be very nice," he said.

Asked about Domenech's constant provocations, Donadoni steered clear of making counter accusations.

Domenech is a much-hated figure in Italy after making several slurs against the world champions, including claiming that they fixed a junior match against France in 1999, when Domenech was coach of the French under-21 side.

"I don't know if Domenech says things off the cuff, it depends how you look at it," said Donadoni, referring to Domenech's claims that the referee in that match had

been bribed.

"You can also say important things but they need to be supported by concrete facts. If you wake up in the morning and start talking about hunger in the world, you're a good person. But we need to see what you're doing about it."

The 44-year-old former AC Milan winger was also asked if he would offer any advice to Capello in his new challenge.

"I don't usually offer advice to someone who has achieved far more than me," said Donadoni.

"I think everyone has the possibility to learn something, therefore we can all learn something by watching Capello. Goodness only knows if Capello can learn anything by watching me."

Eto'o wants to shift focus

Football

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona needs to focus more on winning even if that means dropping their short-passing game style, the club's Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o said Thursday.

"We need to win, win, win and score points, even if we play badly," he told a news conference.

"We haven't always done things well. At times we are obsessed with passes and maintaining the ball. But if you do not score, it does not

matter what else you have done," he added.

Barcelona were defeated by arch rivals Real Madrid 1-0 in the final Spanish league match before the holiday break. The club are in second place behind defending champions Real with 34 points, seven fewer than the league leaders.

Eto'o said losing to Real was "hard" but the team has not yet given up hope that it can win the league title and he defended Barcelona's Brazilian star Ronaldinho, who has failed to make an impact this season.

"The loss does not mean the

league is won, but it will have boosted their confidence. Even if we do not win it, we have to keep going and trying right up until the final day," he said.

"We know how much Ronaldinho is worth and what he can bring to the team. People should be grateful for what he has achieved," he said.

Eto'o will be absent from the middle of January for up to nearly one month, depending on how Cameroon progress in the African Cup of Nations in Ghana. The biennial tournament runs from January 20 until February 10.

Barton finally gets bail

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Newcastle and England midfielder Joey Barton was released from jail on Thursday after being granted bail by a judge at Liverpool Crown Court.

Barton, 25, had twice been refused bail following his arrest in Liverpool on December 27. But his request to the Crown Court was accepted only hours after his second hearing with Liverpool magistrates ended unsuccessfully. No conditions of bail were released by the court.

Barton was collected from Liverpool's Walton Prison by his solicitor Daniel Weed and Peter Kay, the chief executive of the Sporting Chance Clinic that treats sportspeople with addictions. Members of Barton's family were also waiting in cars outside the jail.

Earlier Thursday, Barton's assault charge was upgraded from a Section 39 common assault to a Section 47 assault occasioning actual bodily harm, as well as affray.

It has been alleged Barton and a group of his friends were involved in two separate incidents following a row with another group inside a McDonald's restaurant in Church Street, Liverpool, last Thursday.

The player's brother, Andrew Barton, 19, from Widnes, is charged with actual bodily harm and affray and Nadine Wilson, 27, from Huyton, Merseyside, is charged with common assault and affray.

They did not appear on Thursday but will stand alongside him in the dock at Liverpool Magistrates' Court on January 16.

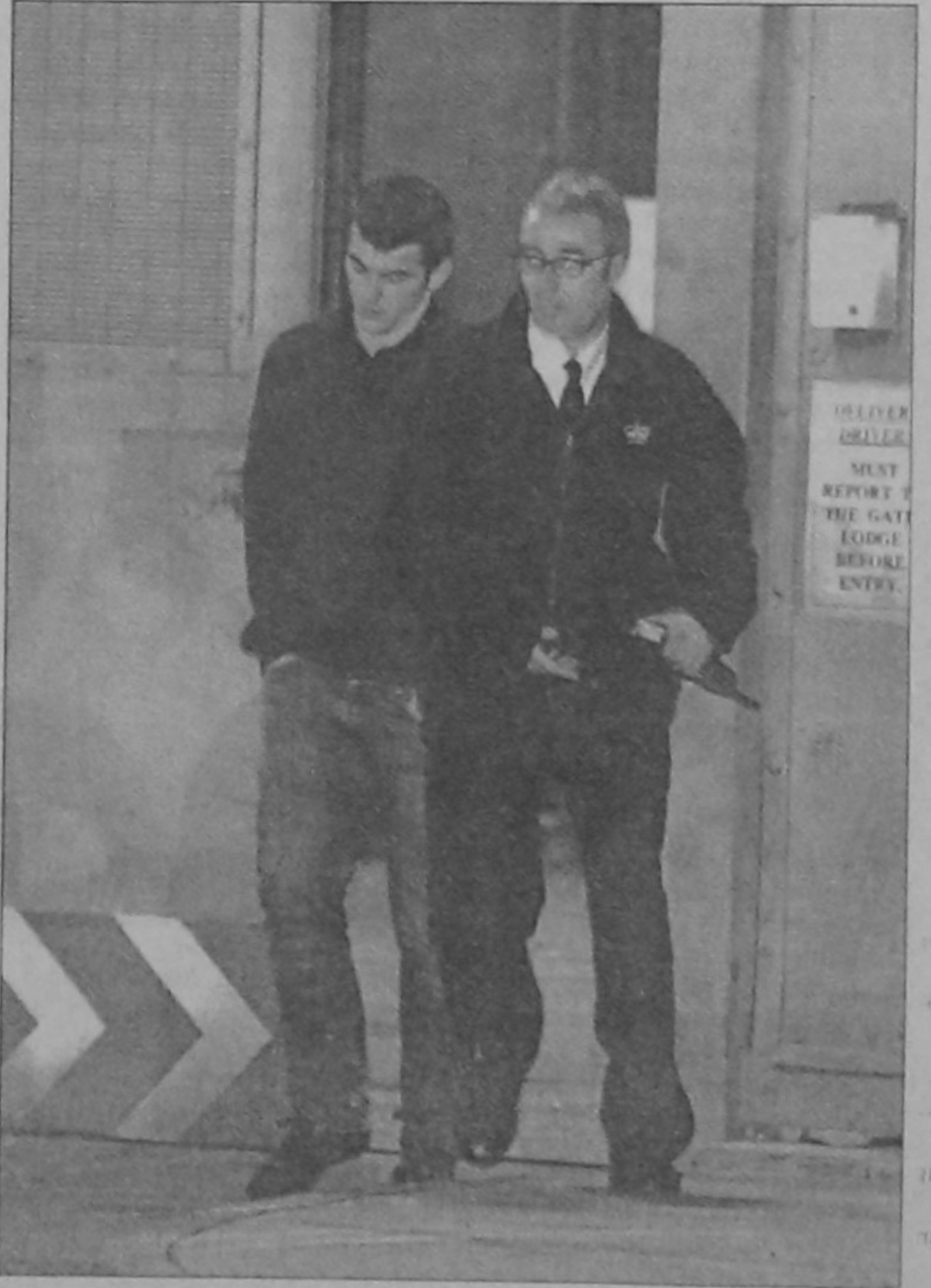


PHOTO: AFP

Newcastle United footballer Joey Barton (L) leaves Liverpool Prison after being released on bail on Thursday.