

GUNNERS HELD

A United masterclass

AFP, London



Cristiano Ronaldo's first hat-trick for Manchester United sent the champions back to the top of the Premier League in intimidating fashion on Saturday after Arsenal were held to a surprise draw by struggling Birmingham.

United took full advantage of that slip-up with a ruthless 6-0 demolition of managerless Newcastle at Old Trafford. Their biggest league win in eight years lifted Sir Alex Ferguson's side above their biggest rivals on goal difference.

Chelsea also exploited Arsenal's stumble, by beating Tottenham 2-0, but Liverpool's hopes of getting back into the title battle appear all but over after a 1-1 draw at Middlesbrough left them 12 points adrift of the leaders.

Newcastle managed to keep the game at Old Trafford goalless up to half-time.

But United were simply irresistible after the break as they chalked up their biggest win since last season's 7-1 win over Roma in the Champions League, a Carlos Tevez double and a rare goal from Rio Ferdinand complementing Ronaldo's treble.

Ferguson admitted that he had to give a tough, half-time team-talk to force United to increase the tempo.

"I thought there were too many individuals in the first half trying to walk the ball into the net," he said.

"I stressed (at half-time) that passing was the key element. Once we increased the tempo of the passing and movement they were a fantastic team in the second half."

"You always want a quick start to the second half and the quick goals settled everyone and after that we played some great football."

Arsenal meanwhile were distinctly lacklustre after having taken the lead against Birmingham through Emmanuel Adebayor's first-half penalty.

Birmingham were rewarded for a battling display when Scotland striker Garry O'Connor headed an equaliser three minutes after the break.

The setback prompted Gunners boss Arsene Wenger to accuse his players of complacency.

"We've dropped two points we shouldn't have," the Frenchman complained. "I feel we were caught by the idea it would be easy and lost our focus."

Chelsea left their new 15-million-pound striker Nicolas Anelka on the bench for almost an hour but were still too good for

Tottenham at Stamford Bridge. Juliano Belletti fired Avram Grant's side ahead after 19 minutes and the outstanding Shaun Wright-Phillips ended any doubt over the outcome ten minutes from time.

Anelka, signed earlier this week from Bolton, almost marked his debut with a goal, his shot on the turn in the closing minutes coming back off the under-side of the bar.

Joleon Lescott made up for the own goal he scored in his club's League Cup semifinal defeat at Chelsea in midweek by scoring the only goal in Everton's win over Manchester City.

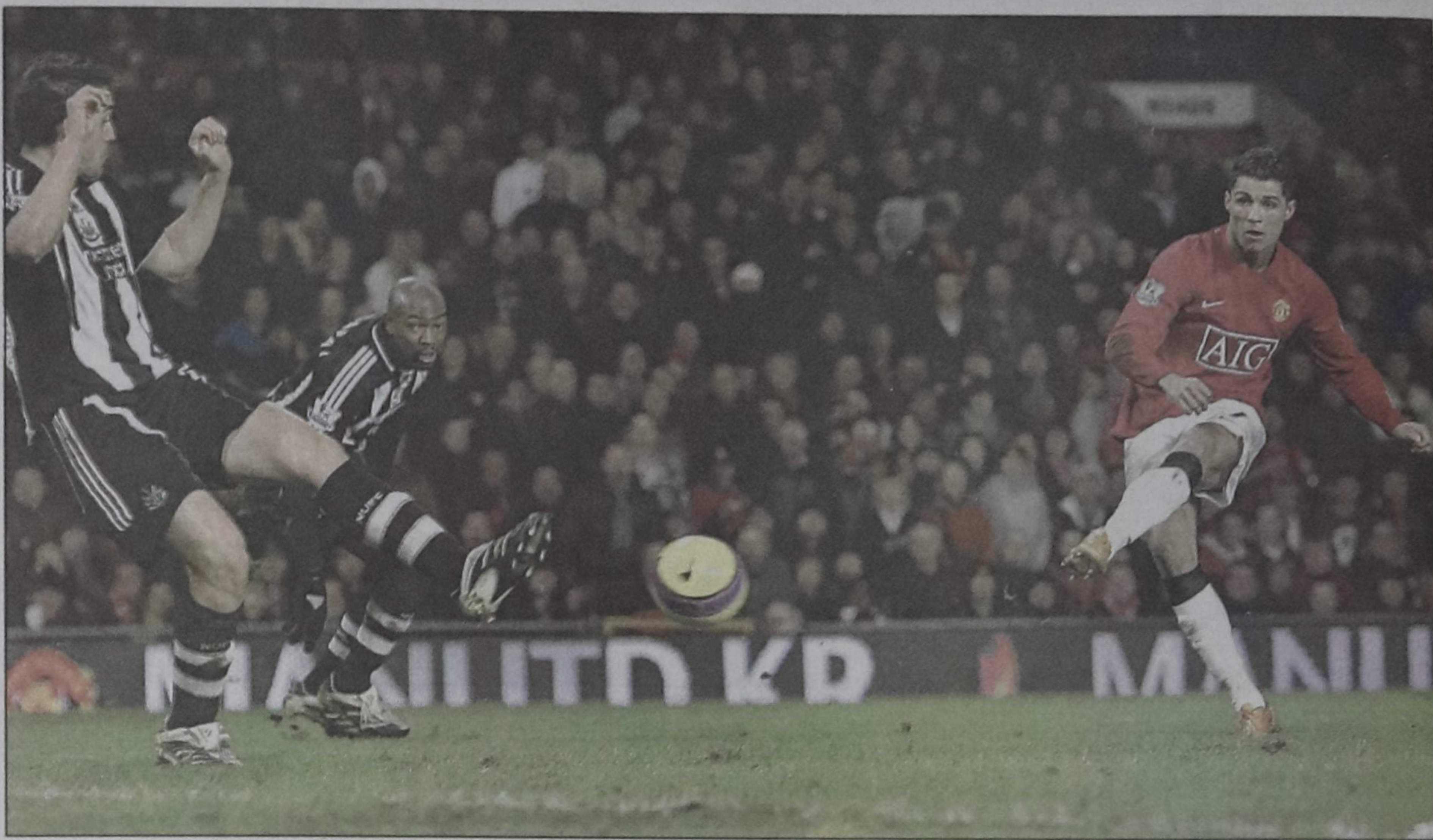
It was a defeat which saw City slip from fourth to seventh in the table.

Liverpool moved up to fourth with their point at Middlesbrough but that will be scant consolation for under-pressure boss Rafael Benitez after his side missed an opportunity to close the gap on Arsenal.

Boro had taken the lead midway through the first half, George Boateng firing home from close range after a knockdown from Turkey forward Tuncay Sanli.

A superb strike from Fernando Torres - his 17th goal of the season - got Liverpool back on level terms but, despite intense late pressure, they were unable to conjure up a winner.

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Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo (R) shoots to score his hat-trick during their demolition of Premiership rivals Newcastle at Old Trafford on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Eto'o brace fires Barca

AFP, Madrid



Eidur Gudjohnsen, teenager Bojan Krkic and two late goals from Samuel Eto'o gave Barcelona an emphatic 4-0 win over Murcia which closed the

gap on Spanish leaders Real Madrid to four points on Saturday.

The Catalan club's biggest win of the season gave Barca coach Frank Rijkaard the perfect opportunity to hit back at his critics among the club's fans and the local media.

Rijkaard has been under-fire since their 1-0 loss to bitter rivals Real on December 23, their only loss in the Nou Camp this season.

"I detected an atmosphere of doubt (among supporters and the media) but I never had any doubts. We've got to believe more in this team and what they are capable of," said the Dutch coach.

After a hesitant start, when Barca could easily have gone behind, Gudjohnsen settled their nerves after 27 minutes.

The Icelandic international opened the scoring with a well-taken goal from just inside the area following a pass from Gianluca Zambrotta.

Bojan, who is just 17, got Barca's second goal after 52 minutes.

"We had a chance at the start of the second half when Fernando Baiano could have scored. If that had happened the score would have been 1-1 and I think things would have been different," said Murcia coach Lucas Alcaraz.

"As it was, after they got their second goal, they felt comfortable and were clearly superior. Nevertheless, for a team that was supposed to struggle this season, I've still got a good feeling."

Henry had dashed down the left wing, outstripping the Murcia defenders, before providing an outstanding cross to leave Bojan the relatively easy task of slotting

the ball home.

Bojan, Henry and Xavi Hernandez all has chances to get Barca's third but were denied by the agility of Murcia goalkeeper Antonio Notario.

However, the almost inevitable goal finally came from Eto'o 13 minutes from time when the Cameroon striker hammered the ball home after another inch-

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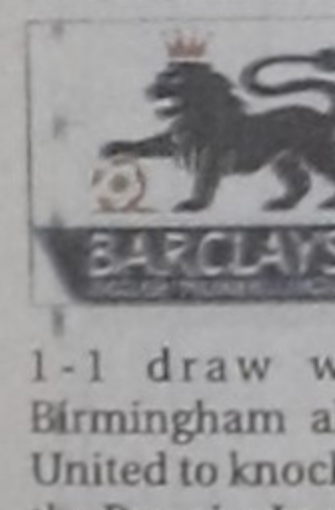


Barcelona strikers Thierry Henry (L) and Samuel Eto'o engage in a spot of dancing while celebrating the latter's strike in their win over Primera Liga opponent Murcia at Nou Camp on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Wenger livid at Gunners

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger has accused his Arsenal stars of complacency after a 1-1 draw with struggling Birmingham allowed Manchester United to knock them off the top of the Premier League table.

The north Londoners had looked certain to keep their noses in front of their rivals when Emmanuel Adebayor's first-half penalty put them ahead at the Emirates Stadium on Saturday.

But they were stunned by Garry O'Connor's headed equaliser early in the second half.

It was just the second time this season Arsenal had dropped points on home soil and Wenger cut a suitably dejected figure as he analysed one of his team's worst displays of an otherwise impressive campaign.

"It was very frustrating," he said. "The crowd pushed us on but we were punished for losing concentration on the set-piece. When we went ahead we thought it was going to be too easy and we didn't create enough overall. We were not sharp

enough and they defended well. It's as simple as that."

"Every game is important so it's hard to say which is the most crucial period of the season but we have lost two points we shouldn't have lost. I'm confident the team will refocus because they are very disappointed. Certainly, in this game the focus wasn't good enough."

Wenger's dismay was understandable.

Birmingham, casting anxious glances at the relegation zone, had travelled south more in hope than expectation and with United not in action until later on Saturday evening, this was an inviting opportunity for Arsenal to tighten their grip on the title race.

Instead, they found themselves knocked off the summit, with serious doubts being cast on their championship credentials for perhaps the first time this season.

Suddenly a run of league fixtures which looked certain to yield maximum points - Arsenal do not meet another top-half side until February - has an ominous look.

Wenger's team did not deserve to win. They may have dominated possession but their first-half performance was too elaborate

and their second too frantic.

After Birmingham equalised, O'Connor heading in Sebastian Larsson's corner in the 48th minute, their goalkeeper Maik Taylor remained surprisingly unflustered.

His players may have been too quick to panic, but Wenger has no intention of losing his cool. The Frenchman has lost three players - including his centre-half Kolo Toure - to the African Cup of Nations and remains bedevilled by injuries but he insisted he has no plans to enter the transfer market.

"I don't look for anybody," he added. "The last excuse you should look for when a team that has won many games this season doesn't win is to say you should buy players. I don't think we missed Kolo either: we didn't defend well on the set-piece and that's how we were punished."

For Birmingham manager Alex McLeish, the point provided a timely lift. His team had been embarrassed in the FA Cup by League One Huddersfield seven days previously but by his team's indomitable spirit - epitomised by Damien Johnson, playing with a protective face mask as he recovers from a fractured skull - was well worth a point.

Vogts talks up Klinsmann

INTERNET, undated

Former Germany boss Berti Vogts has tipped new Bayern Munich coach Jurgen Klinsmann to lead the Bavarians to repeated Champions League glory in the coming years.

Klinsmann, who guided Germany to a third-place finish at the 2006 World Cup, was on Friday named the successor to current Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld, who will leave the club at the end of the season.

The appointment marks Klinsmann's first tilt at club management, but Vogts - the current Nigeria coach - reckons the former Bayern international will deliver Bayern's first Champions League title since 2001.

"Bayern Munich will win the Champions League in both the next two years," Vogts told the Frankfurter Allgemeinen Sonntagzeitung newspaper.

"He will continue the work he started with the DFB (German Football Association)."

Hitzfeld's legacy at the Allianz Arena will likely be a place in next season's Champions League, with the Bavarians leading the Bundesliga at the halfway stage.

Bayern missed out on a place in Europe's premier club competition this season after finishing fourth in the German top flight last term.

Drogba warms up well

AFP, Kuwait City

Chelsea strikers Salomon Kalou and Didier Drogba scored within eight minutes to give Ivory Coast a 2-0 win over Kuwait Saturday in a warm-up match for the African Nations Cup in Ghana this month.

Kalou broke the deadlock after 29 minutes and reigning African Footballer of the Year Drogba added the second as one of the favourites to win the biennial tournament won the only international game scheduled among their preparations.

Success was a significant morale boost for the Ivorian 'Elephants', who feared they would lose inspirational captain Drogba for the Nations Cup and did lose German coach Uli Stielike.

Drogba is recovering from a knee operation last month while Stielike was forced to hand over control to Ivory Coast Olympic team coach Gerard Gili after his son lapsed into a coma.

Former champions Ivory Coast face Benin, Mali and Nigeria in Ghana and many fancy a squad containing Kalou, Drogba, Arsenal defenders Kolo Toure and Emmanuel Ebou and Barcelona midfielder Yaya Toure to go all the way.

Schuster elated with Nistelrooy

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Bernd Schuster said Saturday he was pleased that his "sure bet" of a Dutch striker, Ruud van Nistelrooy, had extended his contract with the Spanish giants.

"Ruud deserves it. He has always been a goal-scorer and he's a sure bet every season. He's also a great person. I like seeing extensions like his. We want him here for a long time to come," he told a news conference.

The 31-year-old player this week signed a one-year contract

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'We are back on track'

INTERNET, undated



Barcelona youngster Bojan Krkic believes his side's 4-0 drubbing of Real Murcia was just what the doctor ordered following a disappointing few weeks for the Catalan club.

Barca went into the game at the Nou Camp having won just one of their previous four league and cup matches and seven points adrift of leaders Real Madrid, who play rock-bottom Levante this weekend.

During that poor recent run, Barca had been beaten at home by arch rivals Real and embarrassingly held in the cup by third division Alcoyano, but Frank Rijkaard's side got back to winning ways in front of their own fans in some style on Saturday.

Teenager Krkic, who netted his team's second goal in the thrashing, said: "We needed a big win like

this. Now if we get through the Copa del Rey tie against Sevilla, it will give us a lot of strength."

"The game against Madrid was a tough blow. We had to recover the situation and I think that we are showing that."

Barca defender Lilian Thuram added on his club's website, www.fcbarcelona.com: "We needed a result like this. After the first goal the team has played well and the attitude has been good."

Thuram also had special praise for Thierry Henry's performance, even though his France teammate had to watch fellow strikers Eidur Gudjohnsen, Krkic and Samuel Eto'o (two) get all the goals.

"I think that we are recovering the best Henry. He is an important player and he likes to feel important inside the team," said Thuram.

And Thuram's opinion was also shared by Rijkaard.

"His performance did not surprise me, because he is a great player and has demonstrated it," said Rijkaard. "Until now, he had played almost always with nagging

injuries, but now he is demonstrating his class and talent. He was the film star on the field. He deserved it and hopefully he continues like this."

He also praised some of the other players who made the most of a start as he rotated his squad around, resting the likes of Eric Abidal, Andres Iniesta and Gabriel Milito.

"Sylvinho, Zambrotta, Thuram and Gudjohnsen have all produced good displays, and have shown that they are very much first team players," he concluded.

The Dutchman called for belief: "We must all believe much more in this team, and in its capabilities."

"The result was very satisfying tonight, especially because we portrayed a great image on the pitch, particularly in the second half."

Eidur Gudjohnsen added: "That's the best I've seen from Henry since he came over from England. In England he was always at a high level. Now he has that spark again, he can make the difference in games."

Euro tickets for sale

AFP, Frankfurt

The German Football Federation (DFB) will put 14,400 tickets for Germany's first round matches at this summer's Euro 2008 on sale from Tuesday.

Tickets for the June 7-29 tournament will be sold on the DFB website www.dfb.de from Tuesday at 10:00 (09:00 GMT) to midnight on February 12.

The DFB said they were putting 70 per cent of their allocation on sale to the public with the remainder divided between federation chiefs, clubs, sponsors and the players.

Some 5,722 tickets are available for 45 euros (66 dollars) for the matches against Poland and Croatia on June 8 and June 12 at Klagenfurt, and 10,321 for the clash against Austria in Vienna on June 16.

But the limited capacity of stadia hosting Germany's games has been criticised in the press.

The daily Bild complained in their editorial Sunday: "99 per cent of German supporters who will

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Federer hopes for hat-trick



AP, Melbourne

Without the glare of the cameras, or the roar of an appreciative crowd, Roger Federer shanked forehands and hit some backhands long inside Rod Laver Arena.

His girlfriend, Mirka Vavrinec, was with him at Melbourne Park's center court, wearing flip-flops in the intense heat and collecting wayward balls as Federer hit with Swiss Davis Cup captain Serevin Luethli.

That's as close as the 12-time Grand Slam champion got to a match situation this week before beginning his bid for a third consecutive Australian Open title.

It's a radically different buildup to the tournament for Federer.

Unable to enter his regular tuneup, the Kooyong exhibition tournament, because of a stomach illness, Federer has been easing himself back into shape for his first competitive tennis in two months.

Federer isn't worried, saying he wouldn't have hung around Melbourne if he didn't believe he could win the Australian Open, which starts Monday.

"I definitely think it's going to turn for the good and I'll be 100 percent, really, before the tournament," Federer said.

Even so, while Federer was hitting at Melbourne Park, his competitors have been playing matches.

No. 2 Rafael Nadal, the only player to beat Federer at a Grand Slam tournament in the last two seasons, reached the final at Chennai, India, last week. No. 3 Novak Djokovic helped Serbia reach the Hopman Cup final in Perth.

No. 6 Andy Roddick, who beat Federer in the Kooyong final last year before losing a one-sided semifinal at the Australian Open, defeated Marat Safin in the second round of Kooyong on Thursday.

"I can safely say none of us here are worried about Roger's preparations for the Australian Open," said Roddick, jokingly speaking on

behalf of the rest of men's bracket. "I think I'll sleep OK!"

Taking a more realistic tone, Roddick later said Federer would cope better than most put in the same situation.

"If there's anybody who can take care of himself and play his way into form, it's Roger."

Serena Williams faced a worse predicament last year. Her loss in Hobart the week before was among her worst ever and she entered the Australian Open ranked No. 81 and unseeded.

Yet she beat six seeded players en route to the final, capping it with a lopsided win over top-seeded Maria Sharapova.

Williams' only warmup this year was at the Hopman Cup, where she teamed with Mardy Fish in the American victory over Serbia in the final.

After confounding her critics last year, Williams was confident of returning to capture a ninth Grand Slam title.

"There's nothing better than a challenge, and I'm best when I am

faced with one," she said. "I am definitely feeling fully prepared."

Her record at Melbourne Park almost rivals Federer's, although it is more sporadic. She has lost only once since a quarterfinal defeat in 2001, although she has missed two trips because of injuries.

This year, she's got the full complement of female stars to deal with.

Her sister Venus is back after skipping Melbourne last year because of a wrist problem. Later in 2007, Venus claimed her fourth Wimbledon title and sixth major overall.

"It is very exciting, especially going into the Australian, playing so well," Venus said last week after her straight-sets win over Sharapova in the Hong Kong exhibition tournament.

Justine Henin won the French and U.S. Opens in 2007 and would like to continue that run at the Australian Open, where success has eluded her the last two years. She quit during the 2006 final against Amelie Mauresmo because

of a stomach illness and missed last year's tournament because she was going through a divorce.

Henin has won 43 of her last 44 matches, a stretch that began at the French Open and includes her run to the final at the Sydney International this week.

"I can say (2007) has been the best season of my career, but it has probably been the most difficult year of my life," Henin said.

She split with husband Pierre-Yves Hardenne and renewed relations with estranged family members.

"The fact that I have my family back in my life changed a lot of things and brought me a lot of joy to do what I love so much," she said. "I think I remained pretty healthy also in 2007, so that helps to be more consistent and that gives confidence."

The 25-year-old Belgian had a 94 percent winning percentage rate last season, the best on the women's tour since Steffi Graf in 1989, giving her a firm grip on the No. 1 ranking ahead of Svetlana

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A relaxed looking Roger Federer (L) has a friendly chat with hitting partner Tomas Johansson during practice on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP