



Russian star Maria Sharapova is overjoyed after defeating her US opponent Lindsay Davenport during their second round match at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Wednesday.

## Sharapova ousts Davenport



AFP, Melbourne

Justine Henin and Rafael Nadal thundered into the Australian Open third round Wednesday, but Lindsay Davenport's comeback Grand Slam was abruptly ended by Maria Sharapova.

Henin, the world number one and top seed, demolished Russian Olga Poutchkova 6-1 in the opening set, but was given a wake up call when stretched to 7-5 in the second before clocking her 30th straight win.

A rampaging Nadal put on a dominant display against hapless Frenchman Florent Serra, racing to a 6-0, 6-2, 6-2 victory to ensure he stays on track while sixth seed Andy Roddick made short work of

Germany's Michael Berrer.

Women's defending champion Serena Williams was also firing in a 6-3, 6-1 pounding of Chinese qualifier Meng Yuan, but the curtains came down on Davenport's tournament.

Fifth seed Sharapova overwhelmed the unseeded American 6-1, 6-3 in her first Grand Slam since giving birth to a son.

The diminutive Henin, who missed last year's Australian Open amid personal problems, admitted she lost some focus in the second set, but never felt threatened.

"Well, I played a good first set. I was well into the match and played very aggressive and I did a good job in the first," said the Belgian.

"And yeah, then lost a little bit of the intensity, a little bit of the rhythm on my serve. And then when she came back at 5-5 I understood it was time to push myself a little bit more."

Henin, the red-hot favourite to claim her first Australian Open since 2004, now faces Italy's Francesca Schiavone, the 25th seed who ousted Angelique Kerber of Germany 6-2, 6-3.

Spain's Nadal, the French Open champion, set up a third round clash with 28th seed Gilles Simon of France following his comprehensive mauling of Serra.

Nadal's consummate victory followed his sterner straight sets opener on Monday against Serbian qualifier Viktor Troicki, who made him work much harder.

"The important thing is I play much better. I played at a very high level in the first set," Nadal said.

"I'm happy about my improvement after first round, and especially I improved a lot with my serve and with the forehand."

The muscular Spaniard is seen as one of the few men capable of

derailing the Roger Federer juggernaut as it hurtles towards a 13th Grand Slam, but he has never been beyond the quarterfinals here in three previous attempts.

Roddick, who could meet Nadal in the last eight on the seedings, rolled past Berrer 6-2, 6-2, 6-4.

"He was trying to hit the ball around the court and it was a good workout ahead of my next match," said Roddick, a three semifinalist here.

A fired-up Williams delivered an ominous warning to rivals eyeing her Australian Open crown when she swatted aside China's Meng.

The American displayed a brand of fist-pumping aggression missing from her tentative opening match performance, receiving a code violation for swearing in jubilation after blasting down a powerful backhand winner.

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## Kuerten set to retire

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazilian former world number one tennis champ Gustavo Kuerten said Tuesday he would retire this year hopefully after playing a tournament at Roland Garros, the court he had cherished most during his career.

"The last two, three years were especially hard," the three-times French Open champion told a press conference in Sao Paulo, admitting his form had slipped since he was at his peak.

He said he was looking forward to taking things easier now -- but still intended to play on Roland Garros's red clay one last time.

"I have a few months to prepare," he said, predicting a wild card slot in Paris would give him an "emotional" finale to his 14-year career.

"Guga", as the effusive 31-year-old is called, saw his ranking plummet following a hip injury in 2002 after his hat-trick of French Open wins in 1997, 2000 and 2001.

Kuerten said his string of successes helped boost the profile of tennis in Brazil, although it still failed to generate the fervour associated with football.

"I had difficult moments, hard moments" during his years on the circuit, he said, but no regrets.

"There's nothing that disappointed me ... I'm a guy who always sees things in a positive light," he said.

## Maniche to fight for place

AFP, Rome

New Inter Milan signing Nuno Maniche said he was under no illusions about his chances of breaking into the Italian champions' first team when he was unveiled at the club's training ground on Wednesday.

Maniche was signed on loan from Atletico Madrid on Tuesday to bolster a midfield that has had to do without players such as Patrick Vieira, Luis Figo, Dejan Stankovic and Olivier Dacourt for much of the season.

Even so, Inter are flying high seven points clear at the top of Serie A and the former Dinamo Moscow, Porto and Chelsea midfielder knows he won't walk straight into the team.

"I'm very happy to be here. Inter's a great club that's very organised where everyone knows their role," said the Portugal international.

"A player can thrive here. Of course, arriving in January is not easy, but the risk appeals to me."

"I know some important players here such as (Javier) Zanetti, (Marco) Materazzi and (Esteban) Cambiasso, who can help me to settle in."

Maniche is also hoping to avoid the problems he had in Madrid, where he fell out with the coach.

"I've got a strong personality and sometimes I can be misunderstood. I always hope to meet genuine and sincere people."

"I'm at the coach's disposal, when he picks me I'll be ready to play." Maniche could even line up for his Inter debut in the Italian Cup against Reggina on Wednesday night.

## SPANISH CUP Barcelona end Sevilla's reign

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona ended Sevilla's reign as King's Cup holders here on Tuesday as a dull 0-0 draw was sufficient to see the Catalan giants through in their last 16 second leg clash.

Barcelona progressed thanks to the away goal rule as the first leg had finished 1-1.

With both sides missing several key players as they had either been called away on African Nations Cup duty or were suspended and injured, the quality of the game naturally slipped a notch or two from their previous encounters.

It was the hosts who came closest to scoring in the first-half as first Thierry Henry shot over the bar in the 32nd minute and then two minutes later another former Premiership player Eidur Gudjohnsen had his shot stopped twice by the Sevilla keeper.

The second-half saw Barcelona easily counter any resistance, which was slight, that Sevilla could offer, though, they did give the hosts a moment of concern as highly-rated fullback Daniel Alves rattled the bar with a freekick seven minutes from time.

Defeat leaves Sevilla effectively with just the Champions League to play for this season, as they are 10 points adrift of Real Madrid in the title race.

Real Madrid, themselves, are in danger of exiting the competition as they trail Real Mallorca 2-1 after the first leg, though they are at home on Wednesday.

## Liverpool thrash Luton

AFP, London



CUP

Rafa Benitez finally got some good news as Steven Gerrard's hat-trick helped Liverpool cruise into the FA Cup fourth round with a 5-0 win against crisis ridden League One outfit Luton on Tuesday.

Benitez's position looks increasingly untenable after Liverpool's American owners admitted they held talks with Jurgen Klinsmann over the manager's job late last year.

But the Spaniard at least avoided an embarrassing third round replay defeat thanks to Gerrard's treble and goals from Ryan Babel and Sami Hyypia at Anfield.

Liverpool's stars ran riot in the second half and advanced to a tie against Conference South club Havant and Waterlooville or League One Swansea in the next round.

Luton had out-played and out-fought Liverpool for long periods when they drew 1-1 at Kenilworth Road. Benitez's side, captained by Jamie Carragher on his 500th appearance, didn't take them for granted this time.

The breakthrough arrived in first half stoppage time when Fernando Torres fed Babel and the Dutch winger's shot arrowed home.

Gerrard scored from close range in the 52nd minute before Hyypia glanced in a header five minutes later.

A 64th minute strike from

Gerrard made it four and the England midfielder completed his first hat-trick for over two years in the 72nd minute.

Benitez refused to be drawn on his future, saying: "I wasn't thinking much about it. We were really thinking about this game because we knew it was important to progress in the FA Cup."

"I'm really pleased because we won 5-0 and played a good game," added the implacable Spaniard.

Robbie Keane's 99th goal for Tottenham gave his side a 1-0 win at Reading.

Keane struck in the first half at the Madejski Stadium to earn Juande Ramos's men a trip to Manchester United.

Dimitar Berbatov was sidelined with flu as Ramos made five changes but Keane made sure the Bulgaria striker wasn't missed.

Spurs had the better of it from the moment Keane pounced from close range in the 15th minute. Younes Kaboul had driven Jermaine Jenas's corner against the crossbar and Keane was perfectly placed to slot home.

Managerless Bury stunned Norwich as the League Two side beat their Championship opponents 2-1 at Gigg Lane.

Bury sacked Chris Casper and director of football Keith Alexander on Monday and the decision appeared to work wonders.

They went ahead in the 18th minute at Gigg Lane through Ben Fletcher. Andy Bishop increased Bury's lead in the 61st minute and, although veteran Dion Dublin gave Norwich hope in the 86th minute,

the hosts held on to earn a trip to Southampton.

Championship leaders West Bromwich held their nerve in a penalty shoot-out against Charlton to set up a fourth round clash at Peterborough.

Tony Mowbray's team blew a two-goal lead as they were held 2-2 after extra-time at the Hawthorns, but Charlton missed two of their five spot-kicks in the shoot-out and Albion won 4-3.

The hosts took the lead in the 14th minute when Roman Bednar met Zoltan Gera's header with a tap-in. Albion looked certain to go through when James Morrison added the second goal in the 51st minute.

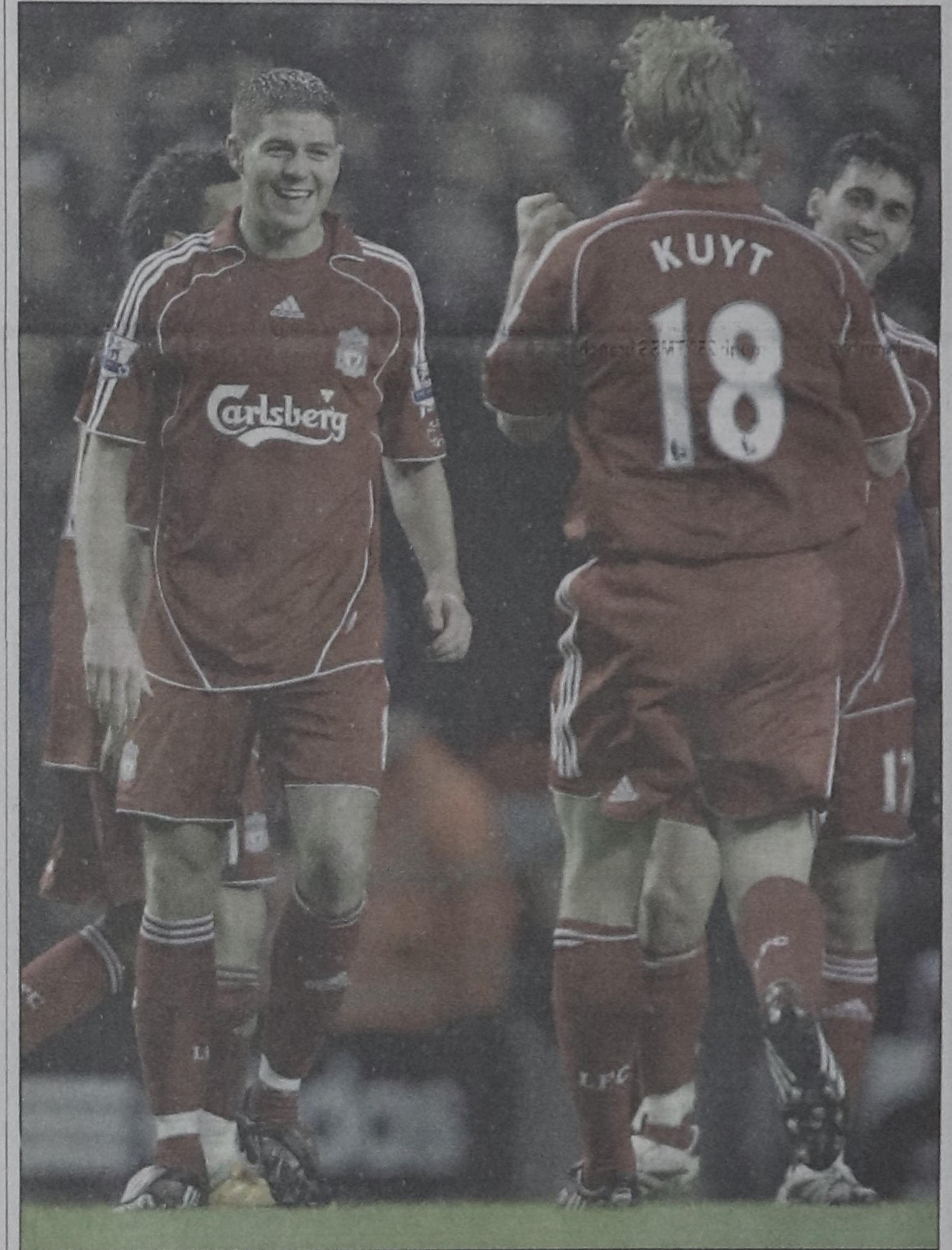
But Darren Ambrose reduced the deficit in the 64th minute and Chris Dickson sent the tie to extra-time with a 90th minute equaliser.

Millwall, 2004 FA Cup finalists, will travel to Coventry after beating League One rivals Walsall 2-1 at the New Den.

Kenny Jackett's side went ahead in the 15th minute when Ben May drove home from the edge of the area. Gary Alexander put Millwall in control when he scored four minutes into the second half.

Alex Nicholls pulled one back for the visitors in the 61st minute but it failed to stop Walsall suffering their first defeat in 19 matches.

Sheffield Wednesday's clash against Premiership tailenders Derby was postponed due to a waterlogged pitch at Hillsborough. Derby's fellow Premiership strugglers Fulham's trip to Bristol Rovers and Barnet's tie against Swindon suffered the same fate.



Liverpool star Steven Gerrard (L) celebrates with teammate Dirk Kuyt after scoring his third goal against Luton Town during their FA Cup third round replay at Anfield on Tuesday.

## ANC won't be moved

AFP, Accra



GHANA 2008

Hopes harboured by clubs in Europe that the African Nations Cup could be moved from its traditional January slot to suit their league calendars were firmly dashed on Tuesday.

The 26th edition gets underway in Ghana on Sunday with English FA Cup holders Chelsea, 2005 Champions League winners Barcelona, two-time UEFA Cup holders Sevilla among many others reluctantly waving goodbye to some of their prized assets for national service.

Players like Bolton's Senegal international El Hadji Diouf have openly called for the biennial competition to be rescheduled so as to avoid the habitual club-versus-country row.

But the notion of a calendar

change to suit European interests was dismissed out of hand by Issa Hayatou, president of the Confederation of African Football.

"As long as I remain the president of CAF, the date scheduled for Africa's biggest soccer fiesta will remain unchanged," Hayatou said on arrival in Accra.

"We are not going to bow to their whims and caprices. We will maintain our stand regarding the organization of the competition."

"It will be held every two years in January."

Diouf though argues that a change is a legitimate notion given the number of African international players in Europe has increased.

The former African player of the year said: "Players like me, Didier Drogba, Samuel Eto'o and a lot of other African players want to play this tournament in June."

"If we did that then we wouldn't get problems from anybody. I understand the frustration of clubs like Arsenal, Chelsea and Bolton who pay big money for the players and then lose them for one month."

"Right now there are a lot of African players playing in the Premiership compared to five years ago. Now we have many African players doing well and that is why their clubs don't want to lose them in January."

"It can create problems for players at their clubs like the ones I had with Gerard Houllier at Liverpool. I went to the African Nations against his wishes and when I returned he didn't want to play me any more because I had gone."

Premiership title contenders Arsenal have been hit hard by the call of Africa - with Kolo Toure, Emmanuel Eboué and Alexander Song all leaving the Emirates Stadium at a crucial time in the title race.

But for Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger the Nations Cup exodus is a fact of life for a club like Arsenal which just has to be accepted.

"I won't use (the African absences) as an excuse if we don't win the title because I've known who we will lose since the start of the season," the Frenchman said. "I must just treat them as injured players."

## Man City after Podolski

AFP, Berlin

Manchester City are considering a bid to sign Bayern Munich's unsettled German international striker Lukas Podolski, Sport Bild magazine reported on Wednesday.

The publication said that the player's agent had already discussed the terms of a possible move with City boss Sven-Goran Eriksson with a fee of around 16 million dollars being offered.

The 22-year-old Podolski was voted best young player at the 2006 World Cup, but has struggled to get first team action since arriving at Bayern in July, 2006 on a four-year contract.

He recently said that he wanted to stay with Bayern until the end of the season to see if he could seal a regular slot in the first team and will have been boosted by the pending arrival of new boss Jurgen Klinsmann who was coach of the German side at the World Cup.

## Magpies want Deschamps

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle are ready to turn to France's former World Cup and Euro winning captain Didier Deschamps as the Premier League club's search for a new manager drags on.

Deschamps is currently out of work after leaving Juventus and Newcastle reportedly want to open talks with him after receiving their second snub in four days.

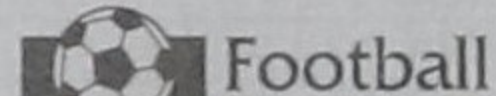
Former Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier had emerged as the favourite after Portsmouth boss Harry Redknapp rejected Newcastle's five million pounds a year contract offer.

But Houllier told Jean-Marie Escalletes, his boss at the French Football Federation, where he works as a technical director, that he would not be taking over at St James' Park.

Escalletes said: "I talked to Gerard by telephone - he is on business for us in the United States at the moment - and he told me 'every time an English club is in difficulty my name comes up'."

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## End of the road for G14



AFP, Zurich

Football governing bodies FIFA and UEFA on Tuesday announced the signature of a letter of intent with Europe's top clubs which will see the eventual disbanding of The G14, which represents 18 of the continent's richest football clubs.

As part of the agreement, hailed as a new chapter in relations between the governing bodies and the clubs, the G14 agreed to the withdrawal of their claims in court.

UEFA and FIFA also gave their undertaking to enter into a series of commitments including financial contributions for player participation in European Championships

and World Cups. Representatives of organisations present agreed to regulate their future relationship with a number of actions including the evolution of the European Club Forum into the European Club Association (ECA).

FIFA president Sepp Blatter hailed the agreement as a turning point in modern football.

"Today's letter of intent gives a big boost to football," said Blatter.

"We have reached this positive conclusion by taking care of the legitimate aspirations and requests of clubs to access the decision-making levels of international football."

UEFA president Michel Platini added: "The demands of the clubs to be heard and to be associated, also

financially, are well-founded. The letter of intent signed today is not a political step, but a logical one."

Speaking on behalf of the clubs, Barcelona president Joan Laporta said: "friendship and confidence is the basis for our game. I compliment the UEFA President on having implemented the change he promised when he came to office. It is a victory for all."

At a meeting of the European Club Forum on January 21, UEFA will propose to the European clubs the intention to create a new body that will represent their interests at European level.

This new club body - to be known as the European Club Association - will consist of more than 100 clubs across Europe.

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Barcelona midfielder Iniesta (R) goes past Sevilla midfielder Poulsen during their Spanish King's Cup encounter at the Nou Camp on Tuesday.

PHOTO AFP