



Spaniard Rafael Nadal is a picture of concentration as he prepares to make a backhand return during his third round match against Frenchman Gilles Simon at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEW ERA FOR MAGPIES Nervy times for Gunners

AFP, London



The start of Kevin Keegan's second spell in charge of Newcastle is likely to attract greater attention but Arsenal's ability to stay the pace with Manchester United in the title battle will also be under intense scrutiny this weekend.

The Gunners, who travel to Fulham on Saturday, have lost the services of first-team regulars Kolo Touré and Emmanuel Eboué because of the African Nations Cup and they looked jaded last weekend when they were held to a 1-1 draw at home to Birmingham.

The setback allowed United to move back to the top on goal difference with a crushing 6-0 demolition of Newcastle and another slip-up from Arsenal could see the psychological balance of power tilt decisively in favour of Sir Alex Ferguson's men.

A week after that Old Trafford hammering, Newcastle will begin a second era under Keegan by hosting Bolton at what is sure to be a

sold-out St James' Park.

United are at Reading on Saturday and, with Cristiano Ronaldo in rampant form, will regard the trip south as a banker for three points.

With 22 goals already this season and 16 in his last 13 games, Ronaldo has, in Reading boss Steve Coppell's view, redefined the role of wide players in the modern game.

"When I was player I went into the start of a season thinking a goal every six games would be a great return for a winger," said Coppell. "But Ronaldo is scoring almost a goal a game - and he's not even a striker."

"He's scoring goals and he's also creating things for the team as well. He's got an awful lot going on in his game and he's a threat to any side in the world. You can only stand back and admire him because he's broken the mould in terms of what wide players can do."

Reading have a reasonable record in terms of frustrating United, having secured three draws from five league and Cup meetings over the last two seasons.

But Coppell admits his side will be hard pressed to do any more than contain the champions.

"These are the elite teams by some way and they are always going to be difficult tests for us," he said.

"But we've got to think we're capable of getting points off them. We know we've done it before, but that doesn't make it any easier."

Relegation-threatened Fulham could have Marlon King in their squad after agreeing a fee to take the former Jamaica striker from Watford.

While Arsenal have shown signs of weariness in recent weeks, there have been few indications that Chelsea are about to falter.

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday
Birmingham v Chelsea, Blackburn v Middlesbrough, Fulham v Arsenal, Newcastle v Bolton (1615 GMT), Portsmouth v Derby, Reading v Manchester Utd, Tottenham v Sunderland
Sunday
Manchester City v West Ham (1500 GMT), Wigan Athletic v Everton (1230 GMT)
Monday
Liverpool v Aston Villa (1900 GMT)

The arrival of Nicolas Anelka has assuaged concerns over Didier Drogba's absence on Nations Cup duty and Avram Grant's side are in a rich vein of form going into Saturday's trip to Birmingham.

Their hosts will be hoping to parade James McFadden as a Birmingham player after their manager, Alex McLeish, finally had an offer accepted for the Scotland star by Everton.

France midfielder Lassana Diarra is expected to make his Portsmouth debut against bottom side Derby following the 22-year-old's midweek move from Arsenal.

"My choice could shock and surprise people, I am conscious of that," Diarra admitted. "It isn't Arsenal, it isn't Chelsea - but I know the Portsmouth manager, I know he is going to play me."

Liverpool's fast-receding hopes of getting back into the title race appear now to depend on an unlikely level of carelessness by the teams above them and Rafael Benitez's side will know they are in for a battle just to ensure a top four spot if they are unable to overcome Aston Villa at Anfield on Monday night.

Inter crush Reggina

REUTERS, Milan

Inter Milan set up an Italian Cup quarterfinal tie with Juventus after beating Reggina 3-0 at home on Thursday and 7-1 on aggregate.

Lazio also defeated Napoli 3-2 on aggregate in their last 16 tie after a 1-1 second leg draw in Naples. Iglu Tare scored for the visitors in the second half before Maurizio Domizzi's equaliser.

Lazio face Fiorentina in the next round.

Inter coach Roberto Mancini was able to field a second-string side, with his 17-year-old son Filippo coming off the bench, having won December's first leg 4-1 at Reggina.

Hernan Crespo was the best known player on show at an near empty San Siro and he made his class count with a dipping long-range effort on 33 minutes. Reggina's Emmanuel Cascione then diverted the ball into his own net just before halftime.

Cesar dinked in a third from a tight angle in stoppage time.

The quarterfinal first legs will be held next week with a draw taking place on Friday to work out which teams have home advantage first. The second legs are scheduled for Jan. 30.

Holders Rome overcame a 3-1 first leg deficit against Torino to win 5-3 on aggregate on Wednesday but European champions AC Milan went out after losing 3-2 on aggregate to Catania.

Adriano gets off to dream start

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Inter Milan's outcast striker Adriano made a dream start to his six-month loan spell in Brazil on Thursday by scoring both goals in Sao Paulo's 2-1 state championship win at Guaratingueta.

The former Brazil international was loaned to Sao Paulo after a loss of form associated with personal problems and a reported struggle with alcoholism.

Adriano's return to home soil has generated a buzz of excitement in Brazil and Sao Paulo fans outnumbered local supporters in the packed Guaratingueta stadium.

The home club took a first half lead when a free kick by central defender Renato was deflected past Sao Paulo keeper Rogerio Ceni.

Adriano initially looked sluggish and was easily contained by Renato.

Guaratingueta threatened to extend their lead as Sao Paulo struggled to cope with the lively midfield pairing of Alex Silva and Ale.

Adriano took up deeper positions to escape his markers and the play proved successful when he crashed a loose ball into the Guaratingueta net shortly after the half-time break.

Adriano's winning goal came from a well-placed free kick that escaped the lunge of goalkeeper Fabio.

"Obviously there is still plenty of room for me to improve but it was great to get off to a good start," Adriano told reporters.

"It is a long time since I had a smile on my face but I am starting to enjoy myself again."

Nadal sneaks through

Australian Open

AFP, Melbourne

Rafael Nadal used his get out of jail card while Nikolay Davydenko rallied his way from the baseline into the fourth round of the Australian Open on Friday.

Nadal, the Spanish world number two, fought off six first set points to seal a 7-5, 6-2, 6-3 win over French 28th seed Gilles Simon in two hours 26 minutes.

Nadal, bidding to win his first Australian title and in doing so capture the elusive world number one ranking off Roger Federer, has another Frenchman Paul-Henri Mathieu next up.

The overcomes the 23rd French seed on Sunday he could face American sixth seed Andy Roddick in the quarterfinals.

Roddick takes on German 29th seed Philipp Kohlschreiber in a third round match later Friday.

Low-profile fourth seed Davydenko is looking forward to a familiar baseline duel with Russian Davis Cup teammate Mikhail Youzhny after making the fourth round.

Davydenko was too strong from the back court for Frenchman Marc Gicquel, winning 6-3, 6-2, 6-3 in two hours 20 minutes.

Youzhny, who played for Russia

in last month's Davis Cup final loss to the United States, defused rocket-serving Croatian Ivo Karlovic 6-2, 6-4, 6-2.

Eighth seed Richard Gasquet set up an all-French fourth round match with Jo-Wilfried Tsonga after a 6-3, 6-2, 4-6, 6-4 win over Russian 31st seed Igor Andreev.

Tsonga, who knocked out British ninth seed Andy Murray in the opening round, accounted for Spain's Guillermo Garcia-Lopez 6-3, 6-4, 6-2.

For Nadal it was an important victory in the context of chasing his first Australian Open title.

"Sure, it's an important win for me. In every tournament, you have to overcome difficult moments," Nadal said.

"I had one in the first round (against Serbian Viktor Troicki). Today was another time. It's important because you feel the pressure."

"In the first set I knew I was not doing the things I would like to do because I didn't play aggressively and didn't have the control of the point."

"I knew at some point in the match I would have to change. I had to try to start to play my forehand and move Gilles around the court."

"When I did that the match changed a lot."

Nadal has the possibility of claiming the world number one

ranking off Roger Federer at this year's Australian Open.

Federer could lose the position he has held for a record 207 consecutive weeks if he fails to reach the semifinals and Nadal goes on to win the Australian title.

Federer, as defending champion, has plenty of rankings points to defend here while Nadal, a quarterfinalist last year, has relatively few to carry over.

Davydenko, who remains at the centre of an investigation into a betting scandal following his defeat by Argentine Martin Vassallo Arguello last August, secured his third win over French opponents at the season-opening Grand Slam.

He followed up wins over Michael Llodra and Nicolas Mahut to outplay Tunisian-born Gicquel from the backcourt.

"I have a chance against Youzhny, playing from the baseline like today and control the ball like I did against Gicquel," Davydenko said.

The world number four has reached the quarterfinals or better in six of the last eight Grand Slam tournaments.

The Russian has yet to get past the quarterfinal stage in Melbourne, but despite his lack of popular appeal he is anticipating playing on centre court should he beat Youzhny and reach the last eight.

Madrid readies for derby

AFP, Madrid



on Sunday.

The Spanish giants went down 1-0 at home to Real Mallorca on Wednesday, losing their 100 per cent record in the Santiago Bernabeu stadium and delivering a huge blow to the morale of the reigning Spanish champions.

"We could have won handsomely but if you let teams off the hook, you pay the price," said Real coach Bernd Schuster.

Despite being well into January, Real seem to be suffering from a hangover from the two-week holiday period, which no doubt including some celebrations after winning at their bitter rivals Barcelona in their last game of 2007.

"We've got to put Christmas behind us now but it's difficult to go from zero to 100 per cent in such a short space of time," admitted Schuster.

Nevertheless, while not yet reaching the heights of their form which they displayed at the end of 2007, Real still lead the league at the halfway point in the Spanish season with 47 points from their 19 games.

They have a comfortable seven-point advantage over Barcelona

with Sunday's opponents Atletico a further three points back.

Much of the credit for Real having such a substantial lead must go to their goalkeeper Iker Casillas, who has kept a clean sheet in their last five league games.

Casillas, who was rested against Mallorca to leave reserve Jerzy Dudek to take his share of the blame, will almost certainly face his strongest test for some time against Atletico.

"I don't think Atletico's defence is as good as ours but they have some huge threats among their forwards. Reyes, Forlan, Aguiar and Simao are all very dangerous," said Casillas's teammate Sergio Ramos.

The central defender was one of the few players to come through the Mallorca defeat with some credit.

With injuries to both Gabriel Heinze and Christophe Metzelder, and Pepe doubtful with a sore right achilles, Schuster has limited options at the back.

Ramos is expected to play in the

FIXTURES

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

Ronaldo is the best: Kaka

Football

AFP, Rome

World player of the year Kaka paid tribute to club and international teammate Ronaldo on Thursday, claiming he is still 'Il Fenomeno'.

That nickname, meaning the phenomenon, was more common for Ronaldo in his younger days but injuries and weight problems have seen him struggle with his form these last couple of seasons.

He was even unkindly nicknamed 'El Gordo' (Fatty) by some sections of the Real Madrid crowd

towards the end of his time in Spain.

But he made a match-winning comeback to the AC Milan team last weekend, scoring twice as the European champions thrashed Napoli 5-2 to end their seven-game winless drought at the San Siro.

Ronaldo formed a threatening attacking partnership with Kaka and teenage star Pato.

"It's always great to play with great players. Here at Milan we have so many champions that it's great to go out on the field with my teammates," Kaka told Milan TV.

"I've had a few chances to play with Ronaldo in the national team and he really is 'Il Fenomeno' like

everyone says because he does amazing things with the ball and when he takes to the field he shows his worth and always makes the difference."

Kaka has also impressed with Pato's goalscoring debut against Napoli.

"I'm happy for his debut, it went very well. All strikers dream about scoring on their debut and he managed to do just that, and at the San Siro in front of our fans."

"We hope he continues like that and fits into the team's way of playing. He's a calm lad; he's playing in a team with a lot of experience that can help him a lot so he gets even better."

Lyon aim to bounce back

AFP, Paris



third-from-bottom Lens this weekend.

Lyon crashed out of the French League Cup midweek, a solitary goal from Japan midfielder Daisuke Matsui ensuring Le Mans' progression to the semifinals.

But the Ligue 1 champions will travel to Lens buoyed by news that Brazilian striker Fred wants to stick with the club after he said he had failed to garner any 'good offers'.

The bad news for Lyon is that captain Juninho suffered a broken toe in the defeat to Le Mans and is more than likely to be ruled out of Sunday's league game.

Hatem Ben Arfa, who missed the Cup disappointment through injury, could make his comeback at

the weekend.

Lens, who lie third from bottom of the league with just 20 points from 19 matches, have a full squad available for the encounter.

Juninho, however, played down the Cup loss and said Lyon would be up for the Lens showdown.

"We didn't lack desire but concentration (against Le Mans). It was there for the winning. It's a shame to be knocked out in the quarterfinals of a competition in which we played the final last season, especially against a team that included many second-choice players," said the Brazilian.

"But we must not over-dramatise

FIXTURES

Saturday
Lorient v PSG, Metz v Monaco, Toulouse v Caen, Sochaux v Lille, Le Mans v Bordeaux, Auxerre v Strasbourg, St Etienne v Rennes, Marseille v Valenciennes
Sunday
Nice v Nancy, Lens v Lyon

things. We're still in three competitions," he said. "We must react, starting on Sunday at Lens."

"We'll have to be careful but if we play at our level, we're capable of winning."

Second-placed Nancy, who face Nice in Sunday's other game - their fifth in two weeks, will be seeking to bounce back from a 3-0 Cup reverse at home to Lens.

Central defender Gerald Cid will likely make his debut for Nice after signing from English Premier League club Bolton.

On Saturday, a resurgent PSG travel to mid-table rivals Lorient without Mario Yepes, who received a red card in the Parisian club's 4-0 midweek Cup win over Valenciennes.

Bordeaux, behind Nancy on points difference, travel to Le Mans, while fourth-placed Valenciennes face a tricky trip to Marseille.

In Saturday's other games, Metz host Monaco, Toulouse entertain Caen, Lille travel to Sochaux, Auxerre play Strasbourg, and Rennes make the trip to St Etienne.

Hip-hop Henin

Australian Open

AP, Melbourne

A very public divorce, two Grand Slam titles, a seven-month winning streak, hip-hop dance lessons, and a bid for election to the International Olympic Committee.

Justine Henin's life doesn't look to be settling down anytime soon.

Last January, there was the breakup of her marriage that forced her to pull out of the Australian Open. A month later, she started an amazing 2007 on the court that saw her retain the top women's ranking, win the French Open and the U.S. Open and start an impressive streak that continued Friday at the Australian Open with her 31st match win in a row.

Henin also hopes to defend her Olympic gold medal for Belgium in

August at the Beijing Olympics, where she is in the running for an IOC Athletes Commission seat.

And then there's the dance lessons.

"My fitness coach gives hip hop lessons," Henin said Friday. "We just started. Just for fun sometimes we do it. It's just my relaxing time in preparation. I'm so bad."

Which would be in direct contrast to her play on court.

Henin's 7-5, 6-4 win over 25th-seeded Francesca Schiavone on Friday continued the streak -- her last loss was in the Wimbledon semifinals last June.

If she wins the Australian Open title on Jan. 26, the streak would extend to 35 matches. That would equal the consecutive matches won by Venus Williams in 2000, the most among active players on the WTA Tour. Although that's still well behind Martina Navratilova's tour record of 74 in 1984.

Henin admits it's in her mind.

"It's a kind of pressure... I mean, one day or another I will lose," she said. "That's the game. I hope it's going to be as late as possible."

"The last year has been great, I've been so consistent. But every match is different, you have to start again. You know if you're not at your best level you can lose."

While Henin says she has a good rapport with many players on the WTA Tour, she's forged a close friendship with Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova.

"We have a good relationship... she's very honest. She's just herself, always smiling," says Henin. "She's nice with everyone."

Before her friendship with Kuznetsova, hip-hop certainly was not in Henin's MP3 player.

"She listens to strange music, you know, not the kind of music that I'm used to," Henin says, smiling. "So I'm always teasing her with that."

Last year also marked the first time in her career that Henin was the only Belgian among the top players in the women's game.

In the past, the French-speaking Henin had to share the national spotlight with the now-retired Kim Clijsters, who spoke Flemish and had a different support base in the country of 10 million.

Clijsters' retirement -- she married American basketball player Brian Lynch last July and is expecting the couple's first child -- has left Belgium with Henin as its only top 100 player -- at No. 1.

"It was great for Belgium to have two players like us at the same time, almost a perfect story," Henin said. "Now the attention is a lot on myself... but I don't feel extra pressure for that."

Henin said she and Clijsters haven't spoken or corresponded by e-mail. "I heard that she's pregnant, and it's very soon," said Henin. "I wish her the best."