

## We will be great: Keegan

AFP, Newcastle



Kevin Keegan has set his sights on breaking into the top four after insisting Newcastle United are fully-equipped to upset the Premier League big guns.

Keegan took the North-East club to the brink of title glory before his shock resignation in 1997.

And after stunning the football world by taking on the challenge of transforming Newcastle's fortunes for a third time - he was also a player at St James' Park in the 1980s - the 56-year-old is bullish about his chances of muscling onto the top table at the head of the English game.

Keegan issued a warning to champions Manchester United, Arsenal, Chelsea and Liverpool as he was introduced to a packed St James' Park press conference for the first time since his appointment on Wednesday, and he insisted: "Take the top four away and this is as big a club as any."

"We're one of the very few who could challenge, because we're one of the biggest clubs outside the top four, if not the biggest."

"Two or three clubs are dominating because of the size of the club and the size of their finances, but we'll have a go at getting there."

Keegan is convinced a potent combination of the financial backing on offer from billionaire owner Mike Ashley and regular 52,000 St James' Park sell-outs, in addition to claiming some of the riches on offer from the Champions League if he can guide the club back into Europe's premier competition, will

give Newcastle every chance of upsetting the established order.

The former England head coach, who revealed to friends he has a 'bottomless pit' of transfer funds at his disposal, added: "Those clubs have dominated for the last five years and we know how difficult it is to get into that elite group."

"I doubt the big guns will be quaking but we're one of the few clubs who're able to break into that group and we're a challenge to them."

"We've got the support and the backing for that and we've now got to put in place the structure and that's the challenge."

Keegan will have an immediate chance to test himself against the top flight elite as Newcastle travel to face Arsenal twice in the space of three days in the FA Cup and league at the end of the month, before they host Manchester United in February. He added: "I've signed a contract for three-and-a-half years, and I'd like to win something in that time. The Premier League's a tough place but I'd like to think I'm a lot more experienced 11 years on."

"If I'd come back here a year after leaving then winning the title might have been a realistically aim, but now it's more about getting a challenge on."

Keegan's Newcastle blew a 12-point lead to finish runners-up to Premier League Champions Manchester United in 1996, to continue a barren run without a major domestic trophy which now stretches to 53 years.

The new manager is convinced that's an unwanted statistic he can finally bring to an end, and he added: "This is Mike Ashley's toy set, I know his ambitions and he certainly knows mine."

"I never asked for guarantees on money but I know if I want to bring someone in I'll get the finances, whether I can then convince the player is another question."

"What impressed me with Mike was not just the finances, but the fact that when I asked him what he wanted from the club, his answer was that he wanted to win something."

"That might sound tough when even when the cups these days are divided among the elite, but in my eyes it's possible to win something and it's possible to break into the top four regardless of what the sceptics say."

"We did it once before. We nearly won the title and we were after Manchester United for a long time."

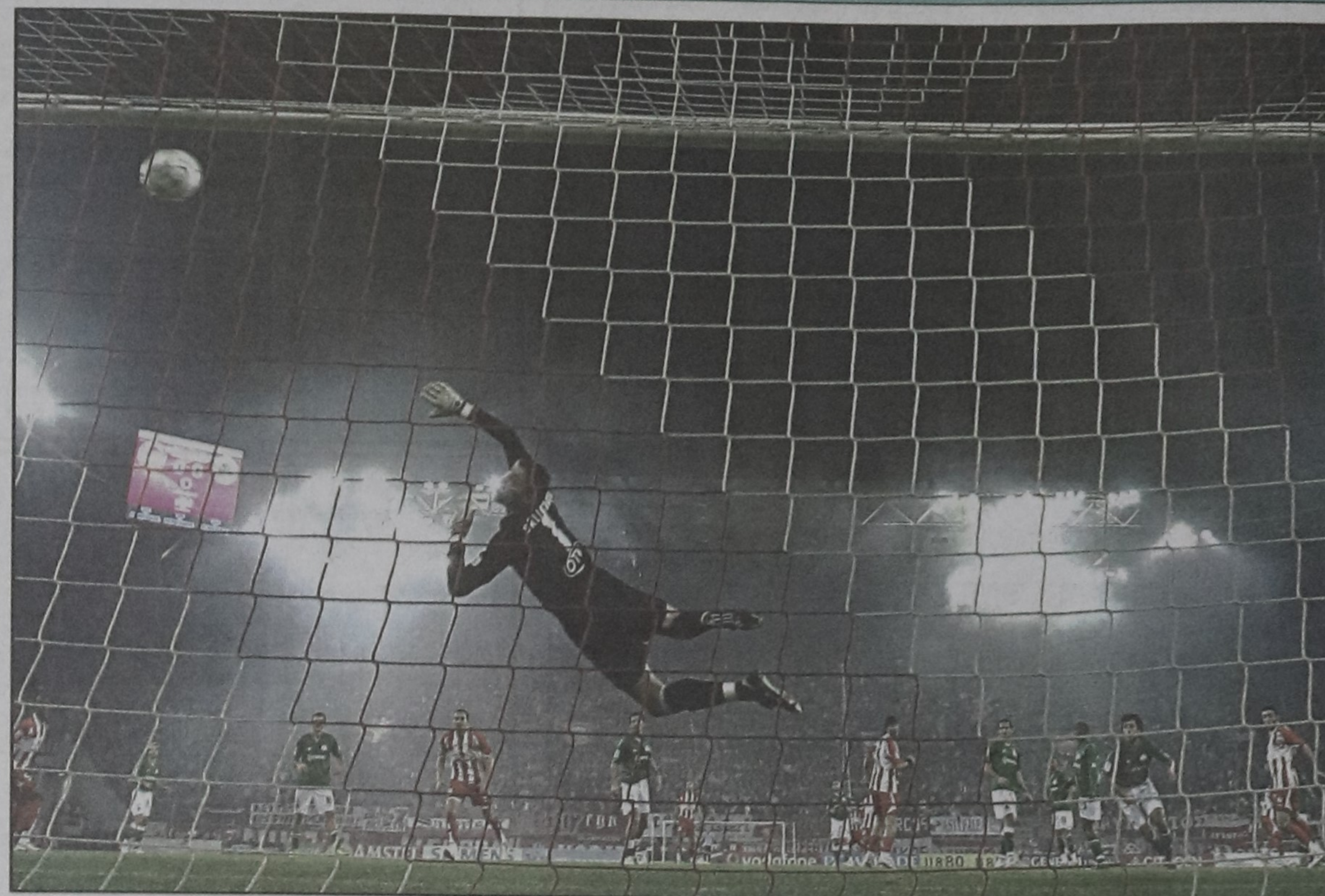
Keegan insists his re-building work will take time, and after seeing his predecessor Sam Allardyce hounded out by impatient fans just eight months into the job, the new manager warned: "Of course it's more than a 12 month job and there needs to be a certain amount of patience. I hope I get it."

Chairman Chris Mort insists the board will back Keegan to the hilt in the transfer market, and he added: "Of course there are funds available to Kevin."

"We approached Kevin through some friends of his and they said we'd be very lucky to get him back here. We thought it would be a tough job, but as soon as we spoke it was clear he was enthusiastic about the prospect."

"We want to win something and we're an ambitious owner. We think Kevin's going to bring with him winning and entertaining football and that's why he's here."

## PICTURE OF THE WEEK



TAKING FLIGHT: Panathinaikos goalkeeper Mario Galinovic is off the ground and at full stretch, to prevent an Olympiakos shot from finding the net during their Greek Cup football match at the Karaiskaki Stadium in Athens on January 16. Despite his heroic efforts Galinovic was beaten four times as Olympiakos progressed with a thumping victory. PHOTO: AFP FILE

## Fright for Federer



AFP, Melbourne

Roger Federer flirted with Grand Slam disaster before pulling off a desperate five-set Australian Open victory Saturday, but there were no such dramas for young Serb hot-shot Novak Djokovic.

While the 12-time Grand Slam champion had to pull out all stops to beat Serbian Janko Tipsarevic, Djokovic cruised into the last 16.

There were also wins for seeds James Blake and Tomas Berdych while young Croatian Marin Cilic put paid to last year's finalist Fernando Gonzalez.

Local favourite Lleyton Hewitt was scheduled to face 2006 finalist Marcos Baghdatis later Saturday in a third round tie on Rod Laver Arena.

Federer's record of 10 consecutive Grand Slam finals looked under severe threat when he was drawn into a fifth set dogfight with 49th-ranked Tipsarevic, before claiming a 6-7 (5/7), 7-6 (7/1), 5-7, 6-1, 10-8 victory in four hours 27 minutes.

It was the Swiss top seed's 17th consecutive winning match at the Australian Open and set him up with a fourth round tie against 13th Czech seed Berdych on Sunday.

"I missed my opportunities and just I couldn't play the way I normally play on the big points," Federer said.

"It was one of those days, I just didn't feel that great but I fought hard and it's just a good feeling coming back from two sets to one and winning like that in the fifth."

Federer is chasing his fourth Australian title and reached the fourth round at the season-opening major for the seventh successive year.

But it was a mighty struggle for the Swiss, who dropped sets for the first time in this year's tournament after becoming the first man since Bjorn Borg at the 1980 French Open to win a slam title without dropping a set here last year.

The last time Federer was taken

to five sets in Melbourne was against German Tommy Haas in the fourth round at the 2006 tournament.

Djokovic said he has conserved energy in his opening three straight set wins and is ready for the bigger challenges ahead.

The third seed had few problems putting away 62nd-ranked American Sam Querrey 6-3, 6-1, 6-3 to set up a showdown with either

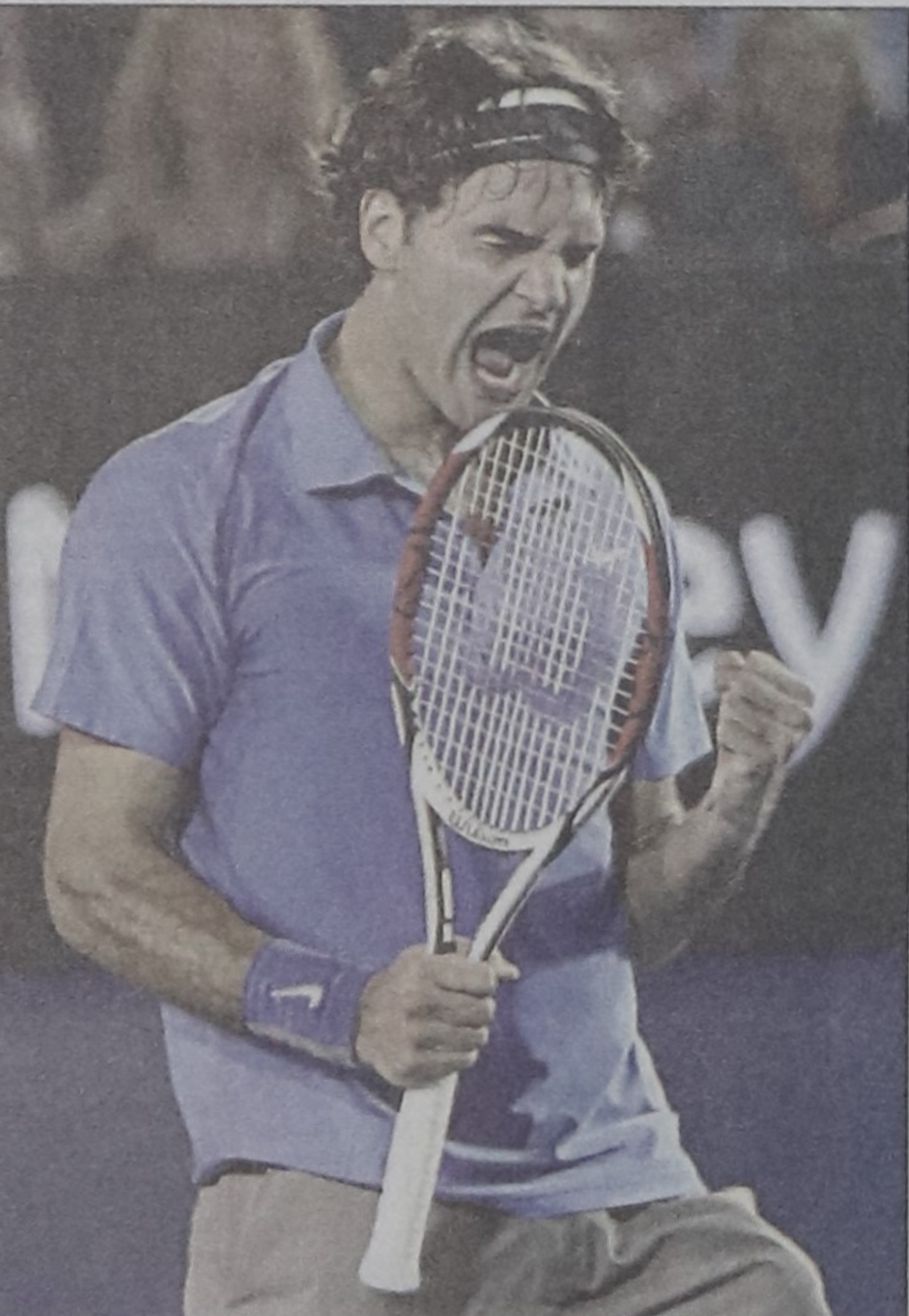
Hewitt or Baghdatis.

"It's always good to have three easy matches on the start of the Grand Slam," said Djokovic.

"I have saved my energy physically and mentally so I can be really 100 per cent fit for the next match."

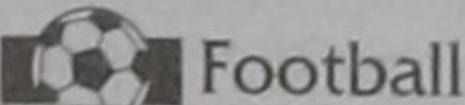
Elsewhere, Cilic bundled Gonzalez out of the tournament, 6-2, 6-7 (4/7), 6-3, 6-1 and Blake produced his greatest comeback to

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CLOSE ONE-THERE: Top seed Roger Federer goes wild after managing to win a tough battle against unseeded Janko Tipsarevic during their third round match at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

## MU to honour Al-Jaber



AFP, Manchester

Manchester United's pursuit of global domination will see a squad including Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney land in Saudi Arabia on Sunday for a visit that will see the Premiership champions play in a testimonial game for Saudi legend Sami al-Jaber.

Sir Alex Ferguson's team were due to leave for the oil-rich state immediately after their Premiership clash with Reading at the Madejski Stadium on Saturday, with Ferguson vowing to take a full-strength squad for the game against Al Hilal at Riyadh's King Fahd Stadium on Monday.

Jaber, who enjoyed a brief spell in English football with Wolves during the 2000-01 season, collected a staggering 158 caps for Saudi Arabia

during his international career and the game against United is set to mark his official retirement, the player having announced his decision to quit last November.

Ferguson's decision to accept the invitation from Saudi Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad bin Abdulaziz al-Saud to play against Al Hilal has raised eyebrows in England, with the fixture coming in the middle of a busy fixture period.

United are understood to have received in the region of one million pounds to play in Monday's match and Ferguson's squad are due to spend a further five days at a training camp ahead of the FA Cup fourth tie against Tottenham at Old Trafford on January 27.

Due to the tense situation in the region and the anti-Western sentiments of some groups in the Middle East, United have undertaken a comprehensive risk assessment of the trip following warnings of

attacks on westerners and western interests in Saudi Arabia.

But United have been assured that they will receive 24-hour security during their stay in the Saudi capital, however, and a 68,000 sell-out crowd is expected on Monday.

Having returned to action in the reserves earlier this month after 10 months on the sidelines with calf and ankle injuries, United captain Gary Neville is expected to make his first-team comeback against Al Hilal.

And South Korean midfielder Park Ji-Sung, another recent returnee from a lengthy lay-off, is also likely to be handed ninety minutes by Ferguson to boost his fitness levels.

United's global popularity sees them rival Real Madrid for the title of the world's biggest football club and a recent survey commissioned by United suggested that they have an incredible 333 million supporters worldwide.

## Stars light up Argentine squad

AFP, Buenos Aires

Playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme and midfielder Javier Mascherano will play for Argentina at the Beijing Olympics where the South American giants are the defending champions.

Coach Sergio Batista said Friday that Riquelme, who now plays at Boca Juniors, Liverpool's Javier Mascherano as well as Bayern Munich defender Martin Demichelis will be his over-age players.

Tournament rules allow three players over the age of 23 to be included in each squad for the Olympics which runs from August 8-24.

Riquelme is 29, Demichelis is 27 while Mascherano is 23.

## Krkic set for call-up?

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's teenage sensation Bojan Krkic could be in line for a shock call-up to the Spanish national side for this summer's European Championships after impressing Spain coach Luis Aragones.

The 17-year-old striker of Serbian origin has been one of the revelations of Barcelona's title-chasing side this season and has become a near regular for Frank Rijkaard's side since the end of 2007.

Despite Krkic's relatively young age, Aragones admitted "he is playing really well".

The wily technician admitted however his squad is far from being formed, and that its backbone would be made up of the players who helped Spain through the qualifying rounds.

## Van Gaal wants Dutch post

AFP, The Hague

Dutchman Louis Van Gaal on Friday made his desire to return as coach of the Netherlands official.

Current 'Oranje' coach Marco Van Basten will leave the job following this summer's European Championships in Austria and Switzerland.

Van Gaal, the coach of Dutch first division side AZ Alkmaar, said: "I want to work as the national team coach."

Formerly of Dutch giants Ajax and Barcelona in Spain, Van Gaal could have one thing going against him - he failed to qualify the Netherlands for the 2002 World Cup in his previous spell at the helm.

Having taken AZ to a third place finish in the league last year and a Dutch Cup final, which they lost, Van Gaal appears desperate to give up coaching at club level.

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## Focus on Ghana

AFP, Accra



GHANA 2008

The west African state of Ghana is about to take its place in the international spotlight as hosts of the 26th African Nations Cup.

It's been something of a scramble but the former British colony is all set for the biggest show of its short life, one that promises to upstage even last year's celebrations to mark 50 years of independence.

Sunday's opening match between the Michael Essien-led hosts against neighbours Guinea raises the curtain on what many people are predicting will be the toughest and best Nations Cup ever staged.

The squad lists of the 16 teams

read like a who's who of footballing A-List stars, their clubs reluctantly letting their prize jewels answer the call of Africa at the expense of their domestic calendar.

And here to see them are tens of thousands of supporters keeping the baggage handlers busy at Accra airport.

One fan arrived on Thursday with five friends from London.

"I shouldn't be here as I've just had eight months off work with a bad back, my boss and my wife are mad at me, but I wouldn't miss this for the world," Franklin Mekinson confided to AFP.

Local hopes are high that Ghana can continue the good run enjoyed by countries that have acted as hosts, Egypt and Tunisia thrilling their home crowd in 2006 and 2004 respectively.

"Everyone says we'll win, but they're probably just trying to be polite," said Godwin, one of Accra's

taxi drivers who over the next three weeks will have his foot to the floor ferrying tourists from the city's stadium to their barely finished hotels.

Ghana themselves won the biennial competition twice on home turf and are looking to repeat the magic under the canny management of Frenchman Claude Le Roy.

But they will have to do so without their injured captain, Fenerbache's Stephen Appiah.

Ghana though are so much more than a one-star team, as they can also call on the expertise of Portsmouth's Sulley Muntari and Udinese's young attacking phenomenon Asamoah Gyan.

The 2008 Nations Cup is being played out at four venues - Accra, Sekondi, Tamale and Kumasi.

Sharing the billing with the Black Stars as favourites are

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## £75 million Hamilton

INTERNET, undated

Lewis Hamilton has become the second highest earning British sportsman in history after signing a new five-year deal at McLaren worth 75 million pounds.

The 23-year-old flew to the team's Surrey HQ at lunchtime yesterday to sign his contract, a handsome reward for the most successful rookie season in Formula One.

"It's fantastic for me that Vodafone McLaren Mercedes has extended my contract until 2012," he said. "I have been connected to them since 1998 and feel I could easily drive for this team for the whole of my F1 career."

Hamilton will earn a basic 10 million pounds this year before win bonuses and a potential championship bonanza are added on. It means that Ferrari's world champion Kimi Raikkonen (24 million pounds) and Renault's Fernando Alonso (12 million pounds) are the only bigger basic earners on the grid.

The Briton's cash hike is a staggering 30-fold increase on his 2007 basic pay of 340,000, pounds although bonuses took him through the 1 million pound mark.

Hamilton is now behind only David Beckham, reputedly on 25.6 million pounds a year at Los Angeles Galaxy, in British sport's big-money stakes.

## Koeman building wall!

REUTERS, Madrid

Valencia are building a wall around their training ground at Paterna to keep out prying eyes after Ronald Koeman complained he needed more privacy when coaching the team, Spanish media reported on Saturday.

"It seems every day I do something bad," the Dutchman was quoted as saying. "But if I get out of the car or come out of the changing room I've got eight cameras in my face."

"The press are almost coming into the changing room."

Valencia have been engulfed in controversy since Koeman sidelined club stalwarts David Albelda, Santiago Canizares and Miguel Angel Angulo soon after taking charge in November.

Koeman's side are seventh in the Primera Liga and are without a victory in seven league matches.

Spain coach Luis Aragones said Albelda would struggle to make his Euro 2008 squad unless he started playing again soon.

"There isn't much time left in the case of Albelda," Aragones told Spanish media. "If he doesn't start playing regularly it will be difficult for him to make the European Championship."

Koeman has said the midfielder, who has won 50 caps for Spain, will not play for the club again this season.

## Seeds crash and burn



AFP, Melbourne

World number two Svetlana Kuznetsova slumped to a shock loss at the Australian Open Saturday, joined by sixth seeded fellow Russian Anna Chakvetadze as the upsets continued at Melbourne Park.

Kuznetsova became the highest ranked player to fall at this year's tournament, following ex-

champion Amelie Mauresmo out the door at the third round after the Frenchwoman's defeat late Friday.

But American eighth seed Venus Williams advanced after a slugfest with India's top player Sania Mirza, while Serbian fourth seed Ana Ivanovic make short work of her opponent to reach the last 16 for the first time.

Kuznetsova, seeded second here, could not even take a set against unfancied Polish teenager Agnieszka Radwanska and was played off the park as she went down 6-3, 6-4.

It was the 18-year-old's second big Grand Slam scalp after she

bounced Maria Sharapova from last year's US Open, but a devastated Kuznetsova said it was her own poor play, not Radwanska's bold shot making, that led to the loss.

"I was not playing against her I was playing against me," the Russian said.

"I beat myself up out there, I didn't do the right things. I was playing within myself and I lost the match."

"The way I was on the court, I didn't deserve to win."

The 2004 US Open champion was disconsolate at blowing what

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Indian star Sania Mirza stretches to make a forehand return against Venus Williams in their third round tie at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP