

'Germany aren't favourites'

INTERNET, undated

Germany captain Michael Ballack doesn't believe his team is expected to win this year's European Championship.

"We are not yet at the level to be a favourite," the Chelsea midfielder told the German news agency DPA in an interview published Tuesday.

Ballack named Italy and France as the teams to beat, although both will have to progress from a difficult group that also includes the Netherlands and Romania.

"You also have to mention Spain and Portugal, and Croatia is considered by many to be a dark horse," Ballack said of other contenders.

Ballack said Germany's third-place finish in the 2006 World Cup at home had given the team confidence and helped its Euro 2008 qualifying campaign.

"We did very well after the World Cup, and we played a good qualifying round and qualified early," he said. "The team has self-confidence, now we have to wait to see what our form will be before the tournament ... it's always difficult to make forecasts half a year before."

Ballack missed most of last year's qualifiers because of an ankle problem, but believes injuries have given the team depth.

"I do believe that the team has made progress. We have more depth ... and because of many injuries we could seldom play with our best lineup," Ballack said. "We have become more stable and our performances do not vary so much."

"But as far as individual class is concerned, we all have to try to take another step forward."

'No changes in UCL'

AFP, Berlin

The European Club Association (ECA), the newly-formed body representing the interests of clubs at European level, does not want to change the format of the Champions League.

"It has been decided to change nothing in the format," said ECA president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

"We've always much appreciated the two-level system: that of national championships and that of the Champions League."

"The less we change that the better."

The ECA's predecessor, the G-14, all the more inclusive in that it represented only 18 of the richest European clubs, had once threatened to launch its own competition to rival the Champions League amid talks to cut the participation of the bigger clubs.

"The big difference is that the G14 was a body not recognised by the football family," Rummenigge told German sports agency SID.

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East European revolution



AP, Melbourne

With the Williams sisters and No. 1 Justine Henin gone, the Australian Open women's semifinals are an all eastern European affair.

And two not-so-similar Serbians are in the hunt for their first Grand Slam singles title.

No. 3 Jelena Jankovic and No. 4 Ana Ivanovic both advanced to last year's French Open semifinals, signaling the start of a Serbian move into the top five of women's tennis.

At this year's Australian Open, the two could meet in the final, if Jankovic can get past Maria Sharapova in one of Thursday's semifinals and Ivanovic, who beat Venus Williams 7-6 (3), 6-4 in the quarterfinals Wednesday, beats Daniela Hantuchova of Slovakia in the other.

The two Serbians share only their nationality. Jankovic is outspoken. Ivanovic has a quiet manner about her and is more private, describing herself as "sensitive" in her WTA Tour biography.

Ivanovic is taking a finance course by correspondence, reads Greek mythology, listens to pop and rhythm and blues music and has studied Spanish. Jankovic likes techno music, considers herself competitive and learned French at a diplomatic school in Serbia.

On the court, they become more similar: both are right-handed with two-handed backhands that produce powerful ground strokes.

Ivanovic says tennis is growing in Serbia, which has a population of just over 10 million.

"We get a lot of support from back home," she said. "Every time I speak to my father, he always says how many people are following us. I think it's great for our tennis and it's becoming one of the major sports back home."

"It's just amazing to have two ... of us playing semifinals at a Grand Slam, a dream coming true."

Jankovic has lost three of four matches against Sharapova, and the two were junior teammates together at a Florida tennis academy. Sharapova lost last year's final here to Serena Williams but looked ever-so-powerful in ending Henin's 32-match winning streak in the quarterfinals this year.

The last time Jankovic and Sharapova played -- at the Birmingham grass court tournament last year -- Jankovic beat the Russian in three sets, including 7-5 in the decider. Sharapova has beaten Jankovic twice on hard courts, including the U.S. Open's second round in 2004.

Sharapova says that makes little difference to her.

"Previous matches don't count, this is a new encounter, a new match," Sharapova said. "Ever since the juniors we've always played really tough and we've always battled it out, and it's great to see her in the semis."

Jankovic beat defending champion Serena Williams in the quarterfinals, one of the biggest wins of her career.

The 22-year-old Jankovic has been nursing a variety of injuries

since straining her right hamstring at the Hopman Cup in Perth. As well, she says she's sore all over.

"They put me in an ice tub, and I freeze, actually, to kind of help my muscles recover," Jankovic said. "But I'm doing fine. I just wanted my body to get stronger so that I can play without pain. But it just shows that I'm not really in the best shape."

Hantuchova, who beat Agnieszka Radwanska of Poland 6-2, 6-2 Wednesday, is playing in her first Grand Slam semifinal. She made the quarterfinals of three straight Grand Slams -- Wimbledon and the U.S. Open in 2002 and the Australian Open in 2003, but it's been a dry spell since.

"I guess I had to get through all the tough times and get experience in order to be able to get to this stage," said No. 9-seeded Hantuchova, who is the oldest of the semifinalists at 24. "That's why I can appreciate moments like this much, much more."

Ivanovic leads their career head-to-heads 2-1, all in 2007. Ivanovic beat her at the WTA Tour Championships in November, including an 11-9 score in the second-set tiebreaker.

Hantuchova was asked before she knew her semifinal opponent -- Ivanovic or Venus Williams -- what kind of match she expected.

"You'll face a stiff test either way in the semifinals," Hantuchova said. "But I've got nothing to lose. I'm in a great position."

Ivanovic agreed.

"She's had a great run ... a lot of good wins," Ivanovic said. "She obviously has a lot of confidence coming into the semifinal."



Serbian star Ana Ivanovic is ecstatic after beating USA's Venus Williams in the quarterfinal of the Australian Open in Melbourne on Wednesday.

Fulham out of FA Cup

AFP, London

Roy Hodgson's miserable start as Fulham boss continued after League One outfit Bristol Rovers beat them 5-3 on penalties in an FA Cup 3rd round replay.

Despite the defeat taking Fulham's run of games without a win to 13, Hodgson said that he had taken "enormous comfort" from the return to the pitch of Jimmy Bullard after a long-term injury.

Bullard had his spot-kick saved by Rovers goalkeeper Steve Phillips to allow substitute Craig Disley to seal a memorable victory for Paul Trollope's side, who now travel to Barnet in the fourth round on Saturday.

But Hodgson did not blame Bullard, especially as the former Wigan man was making his first start since suffering a serious knee injury in September 2006.

Hodgson said: "Jimmy Bullard's performance was an enormous comfort. To play as well as he did after 14 months out in such a difficult game was a big comfort and the determination and aggression we showed to match Bristol Rovers was also a positive."

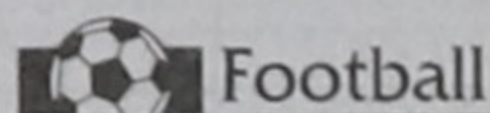
"I was surprised Jimmy lasted so long. We had Steve Davis on the bench and foremost in my mind was that at some stage in the game I would have to take Jimmy off but he was doing so well poor Steve never got a chance to come on."

"And I don't put his penalty miss down to tiredness - it was a good save. Their penalties were outstandingly good too. We only missed the one but never got a chance to get back in."

Hodgson has been busy in the transfer market with former Liverpool forward Jari Litmanen, now 36, arriving on trial, midfielder Leon Andriessen having signed from Werder Bremen and Rangers

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Dunga focuses on youth



REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil will take a new generation of players to Dublin next month to meet Ireland in a friendly, coach Dunga said on Tuesday.

Ten of the 22-man squad are in the under-23 category, forming the core of the team that Dunga hopes will win gold at the Beijing Olympics later this year.

Alexandre Pato, the highly-rated 18-year-old who scored on his debut for AC Milan this month, gets a first call-up while Manchester United's Anderson and Liverpool's Lucas Leiva are also in the squad.

Sao Paulo midfielder

Richarlyson also wins a first call-up to the senior squad.

Dunga told a news conference the game would serve as vital preparation for the Olympics.

"(The Olympic team) won't be able to play friendly matches as such so it is important for these players to earn some experience with the first team," he said.

The squad also included experienced players in Kaka, Robinho, Chelsea defender Alex and Real Madrid midfielder Julio Batista.

Ronaldo did not earn a recall and Ronaldinho would be given more time to recover from a knee injury, Dunga said.

Brazil will face the Republic of Ireland on Feb. 6 then meet Sweden at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium on March 26.

SQUAD

- Goalkeepers:** Julio Cesar (Inter Milan/ITA), Renan (Internacional)
- Defenders:** Maicon (Inter Milan/ITA), Marcelo (Real Madrid/ESP), Rafinha (Schalke 04/GER), Alex (Chelsea/ENG), Breno (Bayern Munich/GER), Lucio (Bayern Munich), Luizao (Benfica/POR)
- Midfielders:** Gilberto Silva (Arsenal/ENG), Hemanes (Sao Paulo), Josue (Wolfsburg/GER), Lucas (Liverpool/ENG), Richarlyson (Sao Paulo), Anderson (Manchester United/ENG), Julio Baptista (Real Madrid/ESP), Kaka (AC Milan/ITA), Thiago Neves (Fluminense)
- Forwards:** Alexandre Pato (AC Milan/ITA), Luis Fabiano (Sevilla/ESP), Rafael Sobis (Real Betis/ESP), Robinho (Real Madrid/ESP)



AGENCIES, undated

Ana Ivanovic claims the time has come for the new generation to see off the old guard in women's tennis.

The Serbian fourth seed joined Jelena Jankovic, Daniela Hantuchova and Maria Sharapova in the semifinals of the Australian Open after defeating Venus Williams 7-6, 6-4.

Williams, her sister and defending champion Serena, and world No. 1 Justine Henin have 21 grand-slams between them and were regarded as major chances in Melbourne but all have gone home early.

Ivanovic, 20, said she and other rising stars such as her compatriot Jankovic, 22, and the Slovakian Hantuchova, 25, had made the most of their chances to reach the

last four. "I think it's for everyone interesting to see new faces and fresh faces," Ivanovic said.

"You know, most of us are very young. Maria is 20, Jelena is 22 (and) Daniela (is) also very young. I think it's great for women's tennis. We all have a great opportunity here this year. It's just a matter of who can stay stronger and do it."

TSONGA AKA MUHAMMAD ALI

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga is starting to feel at home among the exalted company of world tennis' superstars after making his breakthrough at this year's Australian Open.

The 22-year-old made it through to his first Grand Slam semifinal by demolishing 14-seeded Russian Mikhail Youzhny in straight sets on Tuesday.

The powerful Frenchman, a popular figure thanks to his attacking tennis and similarity in looks to a young Muhammad Ali, has

always been tipped to go far.

One of a crop of emerging stars from his country, Tsonga looks set to make the step-up the quickest but he is taking it all in stride.

"It is confirmation that there is no need for me to over-play if I want to beat these great players," Tsonga said on his performances in Melbourne over the past week and a half. "I am capable of doing it by simply playing my normal game."

His quarterfinal win over Youzhny came after victories against ninth seed Andy Murray, Sam Warburg, Guillermo Garcia-Lopez and compatriot Richard Gasquet, the eighth seed, earlier in the tournament.

"Honestly, I wasn't stressed at all," Tsonga said. "I have to admit that this attitude is new to me. Previously, I would have had a knot in my stomach before going on court. Here, there was nothing like that."

"In the dressing room, I was tapping away quietly on the com-

puter so I could listen to music. It was me who had to calm down my coaches!"

LAST 16 WITHOUT A DRIVERS LICENCE

A lack of experience, particularly on crucial points, ended a satisfactory Australian Open campaign, Agnieszka Radwanska said on Wednesday.

The Polish teenager, who only finished high school last year, was beaten 6-2 6-2 by a comparative veteran in 24-year-old Daniela Hantuchova on a sun-drenched Rod Laver Arena, ending her first grand slam quarterfinal in just 87 minutes.

"I was trying everything in first set and then second set," Radwanska told reporters.

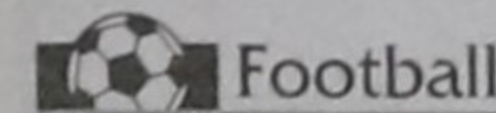
"She was playing very good. She was playing very long balls, close to the baseline. It was very hard to play."

"I made a few mistakes. I also had many chances, but I didn't use

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Spurs ravage Arsenal



AFP, London

Tottenham finally got the better of Arsenal as they booked a place in the League Cup final with a 5-1 rout of their north London rivals in Tuesday's semifinal second leg.

Juande Ramos's side had endured a miserable nine-year sequence of 21 matches without a victory over the Gunners, but they swept away those bitter memories in style at White Hart Lane.

Jermaine Jenas gave them the perfect start with a sublime individual effort and Nicklas Bendtner's own goal was followed by second-half strikes from Robbie Keane, Aaron Lennon and Steed

Malbranque to clinch a 6-2 aggregate success.

Emmanuel Adebayor's strike was no consolation for Arsenal and the Togo striker also became involved in a spat with Bendtner that saw the teammates clash heads.

It was sweet revenge for Spurs, who lost against Arsenal at this stage of the competition last season, and clinched a first cup final appearance for six years against Everton or Chelsea, who meet in their second leg on Wednesday.

Ramos said: "To get to Wembley is a fantastic achievement, especially for the fans. It is a long time since they have tasted a final and that makes it more satisfying."

"The score was very high and brutal but does not reflect what I saw on the pitch," said Arsenal boss

Arsene Wenger, who claimed he hadn't seen the Adebayor incident.

"They defended like mad and caught us on the break. I don't give too much importance to the competition frankly."

While a trip to Wembley is tangible proof of the progress Ramos has made since taking over in October, it was the eye-catching manner of Tottenham's performance that impressed most.

Arsenal, as usual in the League Cup, had started with a below-strength team but Spurs took full advantage to record their biggest win over the old enemy for 25 years.

They had left the Emirates Stadium two weeks ago convinced they should have won after being held to a 1-1 draw in the first leg.

And the frenzied atmosphere

before kick-off served notice of the Spurs fans' all-consuming desire to get it right at last. The ear-splitting din made it clear to the players what was expected and they responded in style in the third three minutes.

When Jenas collected Dimitar Berbatov's pass 30 yards out and surged towards goal it seemed impossible to get through the massed ranks of red-shirted defenders.

Jenas's acceleration and control took him past four players and into the penalty area, where he lashed a low drive past Lukasz Fabianski off the far post.

Spurs were playing with the kind of fluid movement that is normally Arsenal's trademark. They went close to a second goal when Keane powered past William Gallas before

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Batista names first squad

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina coach Sergio Batista on Tuesday named an 18-man squad for a friendly against Guatemala in Los Angeles on February 6:

SQUAD

- Goalkeepers:** Oscar Ustari (Getafe/ESP), Sergio Romero (AZ Alkmaar/NED)
- Defenders:** Federico Fazio (Sevilla/ESP), Ezequiel Garay (Racing Santander/ESP), Pablo Zabaleta (Espanyol/ESP), Cristian Ansaldi (Rubin Kasan/RUS), Martin Demichelis (Bayern Munich/GER)
- Midfielders:** Fernando Gago (Real Madrid/ESP), Javier Mascherano (Liverpool/ENG), Ever Banega (Valencia/ESP), Jose Sosa (Bayern Munich/GER), Juan Roman Riquelme (Boca Juniors), Damian Escudero (Velez Sarsfield)
- Forwards:** Sergio Aguero (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Angel Di Maria (Benfica/POR), Ezequiel Lavezzi (Napoli/ITA), Gonzalo Higuain (Real Madrid/ESP), Marco Ruben (River Plate)

Finnan calls time

AFP, London

Liverpool defender Steve Finnan on Tuesday announced his retirement from international football, drawing a line under his 50-cap career with Ireland.

Finnan, 31, who has been a regular for the Republic since making his debut against Greece in April 2000, said the 2002 World Cup had been the highlight of his time in the national squad.

"But I'll be 34 when the next tournament comes around so it's the right time for me to step down."

"There will be a new manager coming in soon who will have his own ideas for the future with younger players having the chance to stake their claim to be in his plans."

Egypt rip Cameroon apart

AFP, Accra

Egypt have changed hotels three times in their search for suitable accommodation since arriving in Ghana but the Pharoahs appeared fully at home on Tuesday as they opened their African Nations Cup title defence in style.

The defending champions made light of the loss of several key players including suspended skipper Ahmed Hassan to dish out a resounding 4-2 win against Cameroon.

Tuesday's second Group C fix-

ture saw Zambia, in their first finals since 1994, belying their minnows status with a 3-0 success over the Nile Crocodiles from Sudan.

James Chamanga, Jacob Mulenga and Felix Katongo punished poor defending to earn Zambia their well deserved win which remarkably lifted them ahead of Egypt to the top of the group on goal difference.

Not bad for a team that had lost its kit in transit to Ghana last week, but unfortunately for their fans back home the exploit will have gone largely unnoticed.

Zambian state broadcaster ZNBC was unable to come up with the funds to buy the rights to the competition, leaving access to satellite channels the only answer.

Results at the Baba Yara Stadium

Tuesday have left four-time winners Cameroon with a real fight on their hands to make it to the knockout stages.

Samuel Eto'o was responsible for the 1988 titleholders' goals taking the Barcelona star to within one of Laurent Pokou's all time Nations Cup record of 14 but that wasn't enough to deny the Egyptians.

Within the first quarter of an hour the 2006 winners were 2-0 up after a penalty from Hosni Abd Rabou and Mohamed Zidan, who bagged a double in first half stoppage time.

Cameroon pulled a goal back six minutes into the second half when Eto'o nodded home off a right cross before Abd Rabou hit Egypt's fourth with an 81st minute belter.

Eto'o gave the scoreline some

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Cameroon goalkeeper Carlos Kameni (R) protests a goal as Egypt players celebrate during their African Cup of Nations match in Kumasi on Tuesday.