

Getafe beat Santander

REUTERS, Madrid

Getafe moved a step closer to their second consecutive King's Cup final by beating Racing Santander 3-1 in their semifinal first leg on Thursday.

Goals from Ruben de la Red, Francisco Casquero and Manu del Moral sank Racing, making their first appearance in the last four.

Getafe, who lost 1-0 to Sevilla in their first final appearance last June, travel to Santander for the return leg on March 19.

Wednesday's semifinal finished 1-1 after Barcelona scrambled a last-minute equaliser against Valencia at the Nou Camp.

Two former Real Madrid youth team players combined to put Getafe in front in the 25th minute when De la Red headed in a corner by Esteban Granero.

Three minutes later slack marking at a free kick gave Poland striker Ebi Smolarek the chance to volley Racing's equaliser from close range.

Michael Laudrup's side came out strongly after the restart and a patient passing move on the edge of the area led to Getafe's second in the 58th.

Pablo Hernandez picked out Casquero's late run into the area and the midfielder slotted the ball home.

Getafe, showing little sign of fatigue despite qualifying for the UEFA Cup's last 16 and winning at Real Madrid in the last week, notched a third goal seven minutes from time.

Midfielder Hernandez crossed for Del Moral to head goalwards and after the striker's first effort was blocked he reacted quickest to lash home the rebound.

Real covet Benzema

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid are interested in snapping up Lyon's French international striker Karim Benzema, even if the Spanish champions know the young talent will be difficult to prise away, Marca sports daily reported Friday.

Marca reported back in October that the Spaniards had already expressed an interest for the 20-year-old, league top scorer in France and who last week scored a fine goal for Lyon in their Champions League draw with Manchester United.

According to the journal, Real see the youngster as the long-term successor to Dutch forward Ruud Van Nistelrooy.

But Real "are going to come up against a serious problem. Lyon want to extend his contract to 2014 and underpin it with an 'anti-Madrid' clause (which would prevent him going for less than) around 100 million euros," according to Marca.

A further complication will likely be interest from several other top European sides, including Van Nistelrooy's former side United, whose coach Sir Alex Ferguson has already admirably noted Benzema's progress.

Mascherano close to full deal

AFP, Liverpool

Argentinian midfielder Javier Mascherano said Thursday that he is "really close" to finalising a permanent deal with Liverpool.

The Argentina international, who is owned by the Media Sports Investments consortium, has been on loan at Anfield for the past year.

Manager Rafael Benitez has long been keen to secure the influential player - who is expected to cost the club around 18 million pounds - on a permanent basis.

A deal can be concluded outside of a transfer window because Mascherano does not belong to another club.

The 23-year-old told the Reds' official website, www.liverpoolfc.tv: "We are really close. Maybe this week or next week we will be able to say everything's finished."

"We can't say it just yet but hopefully in a few days everything will be okay."

Mascherano came to Liverpool after a controversial stint at West Ham and played a key role in the club's run to the Champions League final last season where the Reds lost to AC Milan.

"I have always said I want to stay here and so it hasn't been a difficult time for me," added the Argentine midfielder.

"I have wanted it to be finished because I have my family behind me and I want to know what my future is going to be. I am calm and relaxed because I know that everything is almost over."

"I am very happy that in the next week I will be able to say I have signed for Liverpool."

"It will be the best moment of my career to be able to say I will be playing my football with Liverpool."

Real look for tonic

AFP, Madrid



After having the unfamiliar sensation of losing three games in a row, Spanish league leaders Real Madrid will be hoping to get back on track at

lowly Recreativo Huelva on Saturday.

Real's nine-point lead at the start of February has dwindled to just two points and the reigning Spanish champions will have to win at Spain's oldest club to ensure that they are not toppled from pole position by rivals Barcelona.

"Three weeks ago we had an advantage that we don't have now, that's a disappointment," admitted Real club captain Raul Gonzalez on Wednesday.

"However, I've always thought that the league would really be decided in May, in the last five games," added Raul, trying to gloss over Real's recent decline.

Real have 56 points from 25 games, with 13 fixtures still left, while Barcelona now have 54 points.

The problem for Real coach Bernd Schuster is that there is a danger Raul and his colleagues could be looking beyond Recreativo, who lie fourth from bottom just one place above the relegation zone, and thinking about the visit of Roma.

Cloud hangs over Slomka

AFP, Berlin



Taking on Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich is enough of a challenge, but Mirko Slomka has the added pressure of

knowing a defeat could signal the end of his reign at Schalke 04.

After two league defeats, Slomka's role as coach is being hotly debated by Schalke's management and despite leading his side to the brink of a Champions League quarterfinal berth, the axe hangs over his head.

This is not a new situation for Slomka: 15 months ago he saved his job after his side put in an impressive performance to draw 2-2 with Bayern which led to a wining streak.

Now three points against Bayern - which would be only their second league defeat of the season - would improve Slomka's situation ahead of his side's second-leg Champions League first knock-out round at FC Porto.

There have already been calls of

The nine-time kings of Europe have to claw back a 2-1 loss at the Italian club last week when they host the second leg of their Champions League last 16 match next Wednesday.

"We haven't thrown in the towel in any competition. There are a lot of dreams invested in what we can do this season. Now is the time to bounce back, added the Real captain.

Two men who could aid Real's recovery from their doldrums are Brazilian winger Robinho and Portuguese defender Pepe, who have been passed fit to face Recreativo after being out of action for three and five weeks respectively.

Pepe is expected to slot straight back into the middle of the back four while Robinho might be switched to the right flank to fill the gap left by Ruud van Nistelrooy, with Raul becoming the main target man.

Barcelona are unbeaten this

FIXTURES

Saturday (Kick off in GMT)
Atletico Madrid v Barcelona (1900), Recreativo Huelva v Real Madrid (1900), Deportivo La Coruna v Sevilla (1900), Espanyol v Valencia (2100)

Sunday
Real Betis v Murcia (1600), Getafe v Real Mallorca (1600), Levante v Real Zaragoza (1600), Valladolid v Racing Santander (1600), Villarreal v Osasuna (1800), Almeria v Athletic Bilbao (2000)

year in any competition and can boast of a 15 game unbeaten streak, which they will look to extend when they visit fourth-placed Atletico Madrid on Saturday.

They romped to a 6-0 win there last season and all five men who scored - with Lionel Messi getting a brace in addition to goals from Gianluca Zambrotta, Samuel Eto'o, Ronaldinho and Andres Iniesta - should start again.

In addition to that unnerving prospect, Atletico also have only one win in their last six league outings to their name.

"We need to go into Saturday's match concentrating, and without desperation, because we'll need to be a solid unit ready to fight in what will be a difficult match," said Atletico striker Maxi Rodriguez on Thursday.

Rodriguez was honest enough to admit that the Atletico players are well aware they are in a slump.

"Crisis? No, but there is a negative streak. We've started to surrender the confidence we had earlier on. We've lost key matches, and that hurts, but on Saturday we have to change that dynamic and get three points," he added.

One bit of good news for Atletico coach Javier Aguirre is that his teenage Argentine striker Kun Aguiar may be fit to face Barca.

Aguiar broke down in training on Wednesday with what initially looked like a torn muscle in his left hamstring but Atletico doctors said on Thursday it was only a slight strain and he could recover by Saturday.

hamstring injury and taking a heavy knock after scoring his side's winning penalty in the quarterfinal victory over second-division 1860 Munich, Franck Ribery says he should be fit.

"I am sure that I will be able to play against Schalke from the start," said the 24-year-old.

In the Saturday's other games, VfB Stuttgart - who were knocked out of the German Cup by second-division strugglers Carl Zeiss Jena in midweek - desperately need a win over bottom side Energie Cottbus to help flagging confidence.

With Bayern four points clear of second-placed Werder Bremen, Thomas Schaaf is another manager under pressure to pick up points after his side were beaten 1-0 at Eintracht Frankfurt last weekend.

The last time the sides met - in February's German Cup third round clash - Dortmund walked away with a shock 2-1 win and Bremen have a score to settle.

And in the day's other ties mid-table Hanover are home to relegation candidates Nuremberg and Hansa Rostock host Arminia Bielefeld with both sides just out of the relegation zone.

Brazilians top rich list

INTERNET, undated

A list of the top ten players' salaries confirms the Premier League as the most lucrative in world football, though the top two earners still play in Italy and Spain.

World Player of the Year, Kaka, tops the rich list published in France Football magazine with compatriot Ronaldinho a close second.

In the annual estimate of players' wages alone - without taking in to account image rights deals and sponsorship contracts - Chelsea can boast four out of the top ten with Frank Lampard and John Terry third and fourth respectively.

Michael Ballack and Andrei Shevchenko also make a list dominated by the Premier League with Liverpool duo Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard and Kaka's heir apparent for the world player gong, Cristiano Ronaldo, also earning in excess of 5.5 million pounds a year.

Ronaldo is due to renegotiate his contract at Old Trafford and can confidently expect to be challenging for top spot after that time.

Former Arsenal striker Thierry Henry completes the line-up.

Top ten earners in full:
Kaka (AC Milan) 6.60m pounds
Ronaldinho (Barcelona) 6.31m pounds
Frank Lampard (Chelsea) 6.04m pounds
John Terry (Chelsea) 6.04m pounds
Fernando Torres (Liverpool) 5.86m pounds
Andrei Shevchenko (Chelsea) 5.77m pounds
Michael Ballack (Chelsea) 5.77m pounds
C Ronaldo (Manchester United) 5.69m pounds
Thierry Henry (Barcelona) 5.69m pounds
Steven Gerrard (Liverpool) 5.69m pounds

Taylor hopeful for Eduardo

AFP, London

Birmingham defender Martin Taylor said on Friday that he'll be a happy man when Arsenal striker Eduardo returns to action.

Speaking publicly for the first time since last weekend's sickening tackle that broke Eduardo's left leg, Taylor also revealed the details of his visit to the Croatia international at a Birmingham hospital.

"I will be really happy on the day when I see he is back in the Arsenal and Croatia line-up and when he is scoring goals again," Taylor told The Independent on Friday.

"The injury was terrible enough. When he gets back to fitness and he puts the ball in the net for Arsenal for the first time, we will all feel much better. People will be able to see that accidents like these are the nature of football and you can recover from it."

Eduardo's injury was so severe he faces around nine months out of the game, ruling him out of this summer's Euro 2008 finals.

Taylor added: "I went to see him on Saturday but, unfortunately, he was still recovering from an operation, so first thing on Sunday morning I went to the hospital and he was really good to see me."

Taylor admitted he was worried how the striker would react to his visit.

"I thought maybe he wouldn't want to see me, which would have been fair enough because of the trauma," Taylor explained. "Although there was a language barrier, I just said that I didn't mean him any harm at all and that I hoped he made a quick recovery."

"He took it on board and nodded. I was just really glad we could communicate. He is obviously a really strong man. Since then, I have read in the papers that he would be happy for me to visit him. That's something I'd like to do."

No running commentary!

INTERNET, Dubai

The tennis crackdown on gambling continues in Dubai, where a spectator was warned for giving running commentary on a mobile phone during Justine Henin's Thursday night loss. The precaution at the Barclays Dubai Tennis Championships was taken just a fortnight after two men were escorted from the stadium in Antwerp for similar actions.

While laptops have been theoretically banned from seating sections at WTA and ATP matches, mobiles remain a viable option for punters.

WTA officials said they saw the man giving point-by-point information in real time, useful for arbitrating the few seconds between the time the play happens and the time it appears on internet scoreboards for possible use in online betting.

The official said he confronted the man, who said he was giving commentary to his son, and told him to hang up.



Manchester City goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel plays with the ball during a football clinic at the Rajamankala stadium in Bangkok on Friday.

Villa test for Gunners

AFP, London



Martin O'Neill does not hide his admiration for Arsenal but that will not stop the

Ulsterman from celebrating if his Aston Villa side derail the Gunners' Premier League title bid on Saturday.

An injury-time equaliser by Birmingham last weekend reduced Arsenal's advantage over Manchester United to three points and on-form Villa's visit to the Emirates will provide a stern test of their title credentials.

O'Neill may have to do without key Swedish defender Olof Mellberg but he is confident that his side has the offensive weapons necessary to unsettle Arsenal.

"We have got players here capable of frightening other defences and that is a major plus for us," he said. "We have the capability of upsetting other teams and I don't care where they are placed in the league."

Manchester United will be confident of collecting three points from their visit to relegation-threatened Fulham, and O'Neill is expecting no favours from Villa's hosts, even if they do have half an eye on next week's Champions League trip to AC Milan.

"Arsenal have been shifting their focus from the Premier League to Champions League

games often it is becoming almost second nature to them," he said. "I would love to say that they would take their eye off the ball against us but it won't happen."

"They have been first or second in the Premier League all season and I don't see them taking it easy against us. That and the Champions League are two competitions that they prize greatly."

Fulham defender Brede Hangeland, who played in FC Copenhagen's Champions League win over Manchester United last season, sees no reason why he cannot repeat the experience.

"That was one of the biggest games I've played and if we could do it again it would be equally as big," said the 26-year-old Norwegian.

"We played above our level and I think you have to do that to beat Man Utd. We'll have to do that on Saturday if we want to win."

"They're a fantastic side with

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT Kick-off unless stated)
Saturday
Arsenal v Aston Villa, Birmingham v Tottenham, Derby v Sunderland, Fulham v Manchester Utd, Manchester City v Wigan Athletic (1715 GMT), Middlesbrough v Reading, Newcastle v Blackburn, West Ham v Chelsea
Sunday
Bolton v Liverpool (1330 GMT), Everton v Portsmouth

Only UCL to fight for

AFP, Rome



With Inter Milan snatching a late equaliser against Roma on Wednesday to maintain their nine-point lead at

the top of the table, it is Champions League qualification that takes the focus at the weekend.

Third-place Juventus entertain fourth-placed Fiorentina at Turin's Olympic stadium on Sunday with a four-point gap between the pair.

Juve have faltered recently, losing 2-1 at Reggina and being held to a 0-0 home draw by city rivals Torino in their last two matches.

That has allowed Fiorentina, who have recently been trying to fend off AC Milan for fourth place, to start thinking of bigger and better things, such as catching the Old Lady of Turin.

Midfielder Marco Donadel knows that the chase for Champions League spots - awarded to the top four at the end of the season - could quickly become more complicated than a straight fight for fourth place between his team and European champions Milan.

Particularly as Juve will have Czech veteran Pavel Nedved, midfielder Cristiano Zanetti and centre-back Giorgio Chiellini suspended for the crunch clash.

"Juventus are on the horizon. It's a challenge we're all looking forward to, like the whole city," Donadel told the club's website. "Winning these matches against direct rivals are like taking a double advantage over them."

"We need to try to be more clinical. Against the big teams we've always played well but have lost the matches on certain little things. "Now it's important that when we get to the final four or five games of the season we're still in the race (for Champions

League places)." One worry for Fiorentina is their ongoing UEFA Cup participation which keeps them playing twice a week most of the time while Juve can rest up having not qualified for Europe last season.

"They've played less than us, as they're not in Europe, so maybe they'll be fresher than us," added Donadel.

It's not just about those two, though, as Milan are only two points behind Fiorentina and have been closing in on the top places since the turn of the year.

But they showed signs of fatigue in their 1-1 draw at Catania on Wednesday and now that the Champions League has resumed again, they too will be suffering from playing many matches in a short period of time.

To make matters worse, their participation in the Club World Cup in December meant they had to catch up on three games in hand during January and February.

Brazilian midfielder Emerson admitted to the club's TV channel that tiredness could play a factor for the team. "Unfortunately (Wednesday) we didn't manage to win. We were a little tired but we know we have a great responsibility," he said.

"We're aware that we have to claw back ground (on the teams above) to achieve our aims. "Also the fact that we played in the Club World Cup and had three league games to catch up on has meant that we have had less time to recover after playing than the other teams."

"We have to be stronger during this tough time but we can still achieve our aim, which is fourth place."

Milan entertain Lazio at the San Siro on Saturday although they have a fitness doubt over crucial playmaker Kaka, who has a knee problem and may be rested ahead of Tuesday's visit of Arsenal in the Champions League second

round class players all over the field and we should look forward to the occasion. I'll do the job the manager tells me to do, if it's marking Wayne Rooney or whoever, I'll do my best."

Third-placed Chelsea meanwhile travel across London to West Ham knowing that a defeat could effectively end their lingering hopes of forcing their way back into the title race and increase the speculation over manager Avram Grant's future.

The former Israel boss is under siege after Chelsea were out-thought and out-fought by Tottenham in the League Cup final last weekend.

But Nigerian midfielder John Obi Mikel believes that setback has been forgotten as Chelsea turn their attentions to the trophies still up for grabs.

"We just have to put what has happened behind us and make sure we move forward, and everything from here goes well," he said.

"We had a talk among ourselves as players and we know we could have done better in the cup final. It was obviously disappointing, so we have to make sure we come back victorious."

Tottenham will be seeking to build on their first trophy under new boss Juande Ramos by continuing their climb up the table at the expense of relegation-threatened Birmingham, their hosts on Saturday.

Tennis

AFP, Dubai

World number one Justine Henin's unbeaten run of 17 matches at the Dubai Open came to an end as she went down to a 7-6 (7/3), 7-6 (7/4) quarterfinal defeat to Francesca Schiavone on Thursday.

Henin had never lost in seven previous matches to Schiavone but despite having a point to break serve early on and making a brave late revival, she was too inconsistent to deny her aggressive, in-form Italian.

Partly this was Henin's determined policy to take more risks to develop her attacking game, in the interests of her long-term physical well-being.

Henin had said she hoped, after making an escape from trouble on Wednesday against Katarina Srebotnik, that this would be another new beginning for her.

Last year she won the Dubai Open after separating from her husband and went on to win nine other titles, and now she is trying to recover from a knee problem and emotionally tiring family rapprochements.

"She played well but I didn't take my opportunities," said Henin. "I was not brave enough and she really took her chances and she was better than me."

"I didn't go for winners enough. I had my chances to come back in the second set but I was too short."

Henin agreed that her long late match against Srebotnik the night before had tired her, but insisted that this was not an excuse.

"When I came back I didn't do enough to win and especially in the tie-break I didn't do enough. She came up to the net and I didn't."

She was below her best and Schiavone was inspired to attack brilliantly, sometimes getting to the net more effectively than Henin.

Henin appeared to have escaped from trouble when she recovered from 2-5 to 6-5 in the second set and earned the first mini-break in the tie-break.

But she could not sustain the comeback, and after Schiavone managed an audacious net charge to

pull the feeway back, Henin served a double fault.

This put Schiavone at 5-4, whereupon she won a baseline rally and closed out the match by hitting an inside out forehand drive winner to follow up a good first serve.

Schiavone said it was the best win of her career and that she had lost the 5-2 lead because "at that moment I didn't push hard enough and she kept going."

"She's so strong. Every point you have to beat her. Every point is a match point."

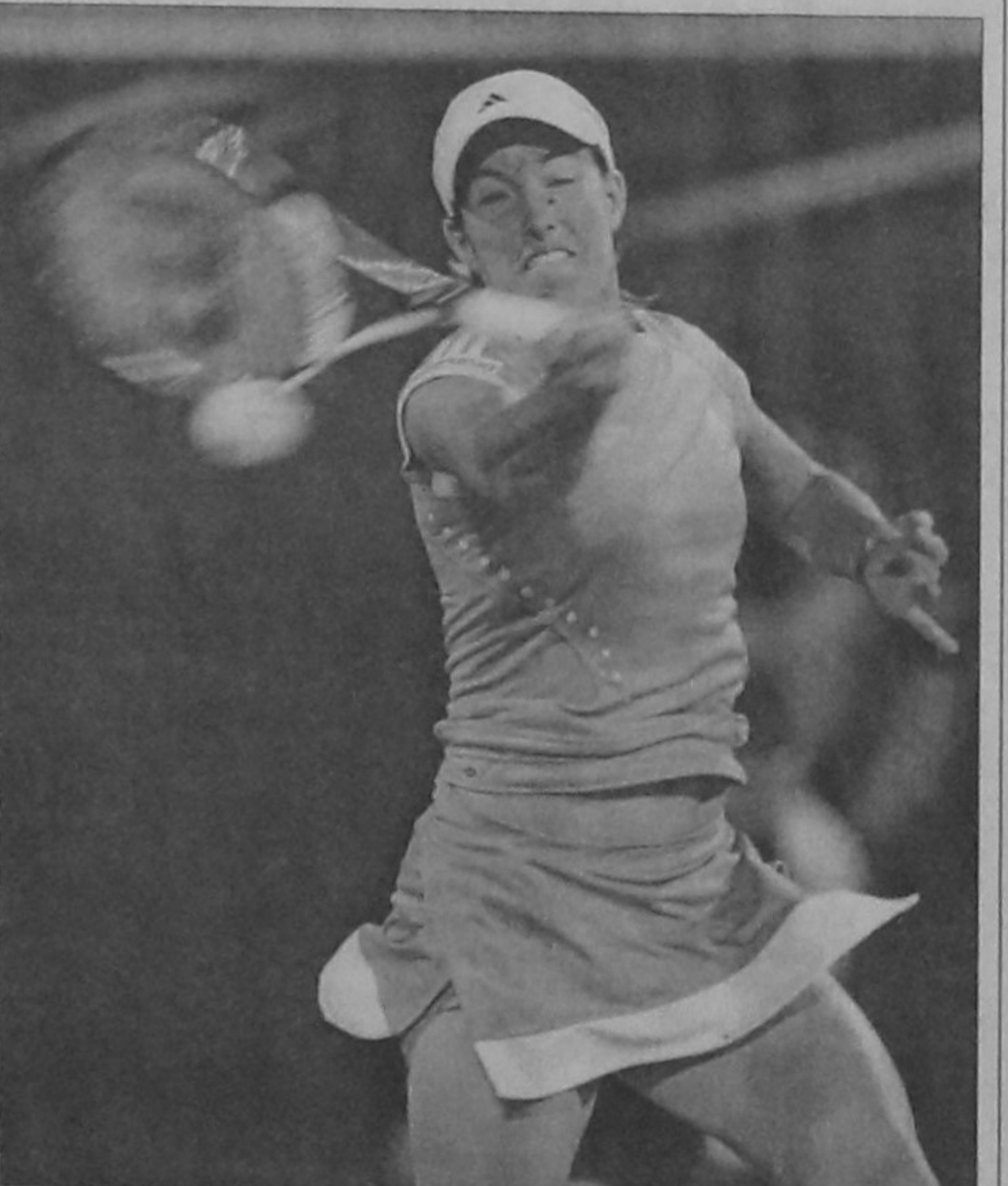
"At the end in the tie-break I said 'you push now or you go home; it's better you push now' - and I did."

Schiavone's semifinal will be against Elena Dementieva, the former world

number four from Russia, who overcame Ana Ivanovic, the Australian Open runner-up from Serbia, 5-7, 6-3, 6-3.

Ivanovic, the third seed, almost did not compete this week after injuring her ankle and withdrawing from Doha only seven days ago. Playing with the injury strapped, she let slip a final set break of serve against an opponent she has yet to overcome in three meetings.

Earlier Amelie Mauresmo's dismal run of results continued as she lost 6-1, 7-6 to Svetlana Kuznetsova, the second-seeded Russian, which means that the former world number one from France still has not won three successive matches since losing her Wimbledon title eight months ago.



World number one Justine Henin of Belgium makes a forehand return against Francesca Schiavone of Italy during their Dubai Open match on Thursday.