

Cruyff backs out of Ajax plan

REUTERS, Amsterdam

Former Ajax Amsterdam great Johan Cruyff has pulled out of plans to revamp the club's youth department because of differences with Marco van Basten, who takes over as coach on July 1.

Cruyff indicated last month he would take on the assignment, his first official position with Ajax since being sacked as coach in 1988.

"There is a professional difference of opinion and not a personal conflict because I want to bring back the level of the youth department to where it belongs," the 60-year-old former European Player of the Year said in a statement issued by his foundation on Friday.

The differences between Cruyff and the new technical staff led by van Basten, who will take over from Adrie Koster as coach of Ajax after leading Netherlands at Euro 2008, were too great, added the foundation.

"There are drastic measures necessary. I made a clear plan but my vision is not shared by those who should execute it," said Cruyff.

"What Johan wanted to do for Ajax's youth department was going too fast for me. I am not so dissatisfied with how things are going now," said van Basten.

Ajax said Cruyff had given back the assignment and that Cor van Eijden, chairman of the club's member council, was "surprised" at the news.

The team are second in the league, six points behind PSV Eindhoven.

Ajax also failed to reach this season's UEFA Cup group stage, their worst European campaign in 20 years.

Cruyff started his career at Ajax in 1964 before joining Barcelona in 1973.

He returned to the Dutch club in 1981 for a two-year spell and in 1985 he started his coaching career, taking Ajax to victory in the 1987 European Cup Winners' Cup.

Van Basten began his playing career at the Amsterdam team in 1981 and remained there until he joined AC Milan in 1987.

Moyes playing mind-games

AFP, London

Everton boss David Moyes cranked up the mind games with Liverpool in the race for a Champions League place on Thursday by revealing he thought the Anfield giants would have been champions this season.

Everton are at struggling Sunderland on Sunday but Moyes heaped more pressure on Liverpool, who moved into fourth place in the Premier League by beating West Ham 4-0 in midweek, by underlining the Reds' underachievement this campaign.

Moyes believes fourth place - the last Champions League qualifying place - for Liverpool is a failure for the Anfield club.

"I thought Liverpool would finish first or second this season with the additions they made; I felt they would come very close to winning the championship," he said.

"I think that it cannot be seen as success if Liverpool finish fourth, if Everton finish fourth then that is success."

"But it cannot be seen as success for them. Not for a side who set out to win the title or certainly come second."

"They have spent accordingly to win the title, so for them not to qualify for the Champions League is a serious problem, while it would not be for us."

"We don't budget for that - maybe in the future we might - but not at present."

Moyes was named manager of the month for February on Thursday, a day after his team slumped to a 2-0 UEFA Cup loss at Fiorentina.

Becks back to training

AFP, Hong Kong

Soccer superstar David Beckham resumed training on Saturday ahead of a friendly here after suffering a minor injury during LA Galaxy's Asian tour.

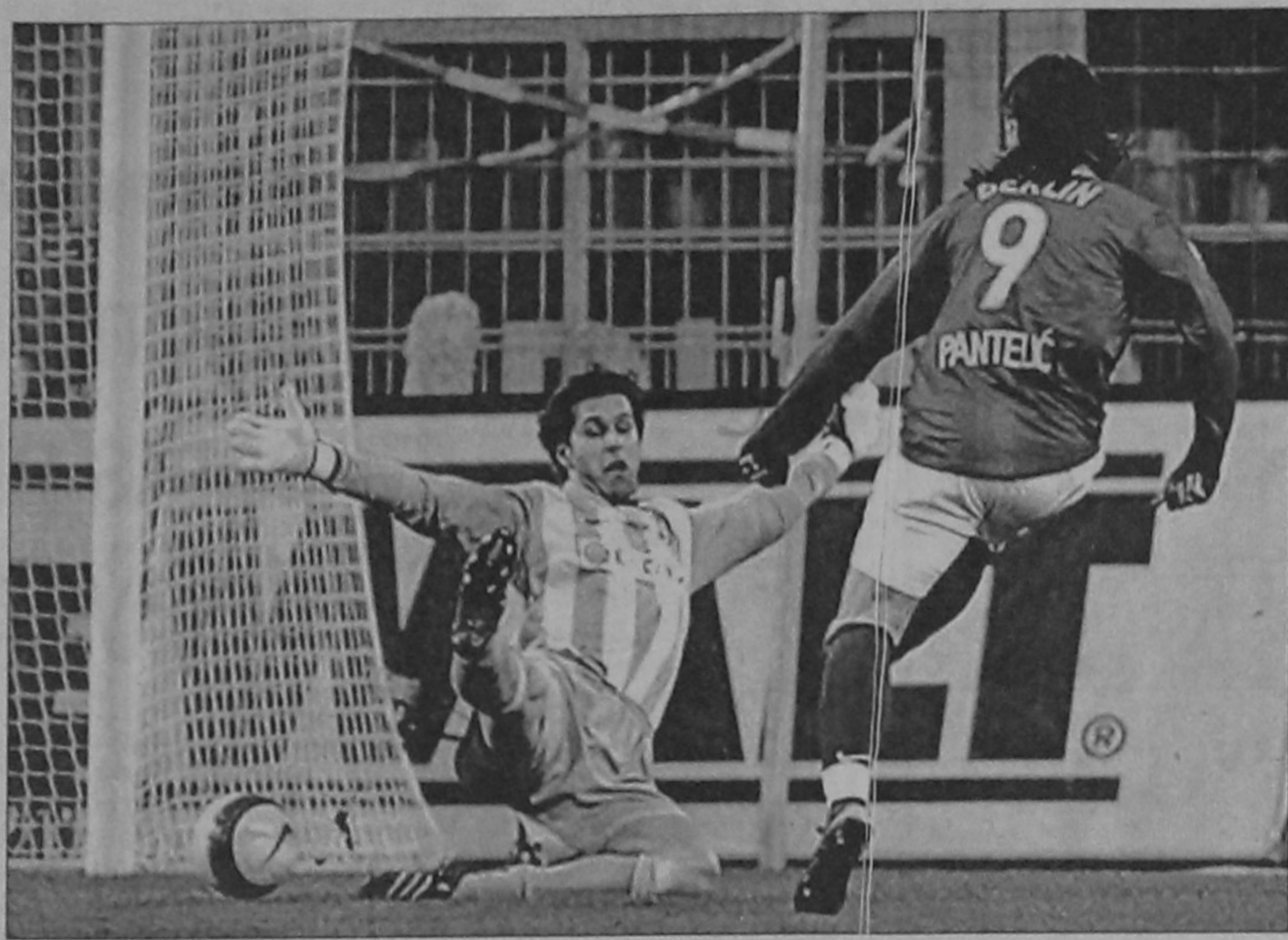
Beckham showed no signs of discomfort as he joined an eight-a-side game and delivered his trademark crosses in front of media at Hong Kong Stadium.

Beckham, 32, is using the tour to regain match fitness as he presses for a 100th England cap in the March 26 friendly against France.

He limped out of this week's match in Shanghai after 70 minutes with a right thigh problem but later confirmed he would play here.

Beckham's visit has been low-key compared to his 2003 trip here with Real Madrid. Some 80 per cent of tickets for Sunday's match remain unsold, a report said.

"This is the Galaxy, not Real Madrid," Hong Kong Football Association Brian Leung told the South China Morning Post.



Hertha Berlin striker Marko Pantelic (R) scores past Borussia Dortmund 'keeper Marco Zeigler during their Bundesliga match at the Signal Iduna Park on Friday.

Gunners walking on air

AFP, Wigan

Arsenal's return flight from Milan touched down in London in the small hours of Wednesday morning, yet even now Arsenal Wenger's players must feel as if they are walking on air.

The implications of the north Londoners' stunning Champions League win at San Siro are still reverberating around Europe, which has been united in its celebration of a new footballing force.

But if anything can bring Arsenal's giddy stars down to earth with a resounding crash, it is Sunday's trip to Wigan's JJB stadium.

Wenger had little choice but to allow his squad to enjoy their moment in Milan but he knows better than most that the hard work starts now. For all the tributes to their flowing football, Arsenal are still far from guaranteed their first silverware since 2005.

There will be no easy matches in the quarterfinals of the Champions League while, perhaps more pertinently for Wenger, who has always maintained that winning back the English Premier League title is his top priority, his lead at the top of the table has been whittled down to a single point following a jittery

recent run. And if it seems inconceivable that the first English team to conquer Milan in their own backyard could come unstuck at lowly Wigan, Wenger will remind his charges that the last time Arsenal shocked the continent - with a 1-0 win at Real Madrid in 2006 - they promptly lost at Blackburn in their next league outing.

Small wonder, then, that the Frenchman's players are striving to put the heady events of last week out of their minds.

"It's fantastic to play in the Champions League and beat AC Milan but to come back in the Premier League to go to Wigan is not going to be easy," Mathieu Flamini, one of the stars at the Giuseppe Meazza, said.

"It's a tough game but we have to finish the job in the league now. It will be fantastic if we win at Wigan."

For all that Sunday's match has a treacherous look for Arsenal, who traditionally do not enjoy outings to English football's northern outposts, it would still be a shock if they did not extend their advantage over Manchester United to four points.

Wenger had looked desperately short of options following a series of injuries to key players in recent weeks, but the outlook is now

sunnier. Robin van Persie, who has made just one fleeting appearance for the club since December due to a series of muscular injuries, was an unused substitute in Italy and should be involved again at Wigan, while Kolo Toure and Tomas Rosicky are also close to returning.

"We have had lots of injuries but now players are coming back so it is all positive," Cesc Fabregas said.

"The spirit of the team is amazing, and we have to keep going. Now, though, we just have to be focused on Sunday's game - we have to go to Wigan and win there."

Arsenal's win in Milan left Mario Melchiot, the Wigan defender, looking rather sheepish.

The French defender had claimed last Sunday that Wenger's team were "cracking" under the strain of chasing two trophies, although his remarks that United's experience in title races will ultimately prove decisive could yet be proved right.

"As individuals the ability of Arsenal will never be the problem - it's just their experience," he said.

"The experience will come down to Manchester United. But obviously it's going to be a tough game for us because they are one of the best teams in the league. I know this will be a great game to be involved in."

Benzema extends Lyon contract

REUTERS, Lyon

Prolific France striker Karim Benzema has agreed to extend his Olympique Lyon contract, the six-times French champions said on Friday.

Benzema, 20, has scored 26 goals in all competitions this season, including 16 in Ligue 1, and has been linked with several leading European clubs including Manchester United.

"We shook hands 48 hours ago," Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas told reporters. "We have an agreement with Karim. Now we have to reach one with the people who advise him."

Benzema was already contracted to Lyon until 2012 and Aulas was negotiating a two-year extension with a pay rise that would make him the highest-paid player in Ligue 1, a source close to the player said.

The Lyon chairman, who said recently he was considering setting a buyout clause worth 100 million euros, said the idea was to make sure Benzema stayed at least another season and possibly until 2010.

Details of the deal could be announced next week, Aulas said.

EPL harder than La Liga: Pires

AFP, Madrid

Former Arsenal midfielder Robert Pires believes that the English Premier League is far stronger than the Spanish championship where he now plies his trade with Villarreal.

"The English championship is a much stronger than La Liga. They have three teams in the Champions League quarterfinals and could have four," said former French international Pires.

"In Spain, only Barcelona have made it to the last eight so you have to accept that the Premier League is a higher level and is physically stronger."

Manchester United, Arsenal and Chelsea all reached the Champions League quarterfinals this week while Liverpool will take a 2-0 lead to Inter Milan in their last 16 clash next week.

Spain's contingent was cut by the elimination of both Real Madrid and Sevilla.

Gazza released from hospital

AFP, London

Former England footballer Paul Gascoigne has been released from hospital after being detained under mental health laws because of potentially threatening behaviour, it was reported Saturday.

The Daily Mirror said Gascoigne, 40, had gone to stay with his father John in northeast England after his release yesterday from a specialist hospital in Darlington.

Gascoigne was sectioned on February 20 after he was said to be acting as a "potential menace" at a hotel in Gateshead, northeast England.

Earlier that night he had been acting strangely at a trendy hotel and bar in Newcastle.

The Mirror pictured Gascoigne leaving hospital, looking thin and drawn and wearing a beige jacket, gold necklace and a diamond earring.

Rakitic pines for a big club

REUTERS, Zagreb

Schalke's Croatian midfielder Ivan Rakitic wants to join a bigger European club to advance his career.

"Knowing that major European clubs such as Juventus are interested in me is a great honour and I am looking forward to moving on with my career," Rakitic, 19, told Croatian daily Jutarnji List on Friday.

"I haven't started negotiating with anyone yet but I have no preferences as far as countries are concerned. The only thing that matters is my future and I will choose an environment in which I can advance most," Rakitic said.

Media have speculated that the Swiss-born Rakitic was unhappy with his position in the German club, whose coach Mirko Slomka has not made him a regular starter this season.

"I don't know why I did not play from the start against Porto. The coach apparently wanted us to play defensively," Rakitic told the daily.

Schalke 04 reached the Champions League quarterfinals for the first time after eliminating Porto on Wednesday in a penalty shootout.

Rakitic played for two years at FC Basel before signing for Schalke last year.

Inter find new home

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Inter Milan have found a suitable area for a new stadium of their own, club president Massimo Moratti said on Friday.

Talks about moving from the ageing San Siro, which the Serie A leaders share with AC Milan, have been going on for years.

"There is a project and it is at an advanced stage. We have pinpointed an area to build it (the stadium)," Moratti told Gazzetta dello Sport's Web site (www.gazzetta.it).

Inter's owner said he would like the new stadium to be named after former player and president Giacinto Facchetti, who died in 2006.

The Italian champions are

celebrating their centenary this week with events planned at Saturday's home match with Reggina and a special game involving former Inter players taking place on Sunday.

Inter were formed in March 1908 when a group broke away from Milan Cricket and Football Club, later to become AC Milan, because they wanted to open up a team to foreigners.

Moratti has been reminiscing throughout the week, telling Sky television that Inter once nearly signed Pele from Santos and mentioning to Gazzetta his biggest regret was not buying Eric Cantona and that Ronaldinho was an "unrealised dream".

In 1998, then Inter striker Ronaldo told Moratti to buy Alessandro Del Piero.

"Ronie advised me to buy Del Piero. But obviously it wasn't possible, Juve would have never let him go," he said.

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Moratti also lauded Barcelona's Lionel Messi and Liverpool's Steven Gerrard as well as telling reporters his decision to let Andrea Pirlo join rivals Milan was a "very serious error".

Former forward Roberto Baggio could one day become an Inter director, Moratti told Gazzetta.

He also hailed coach Roberto Mancini ahead of Tuesday's Champions League first knockout round second leg at home to Liverpool.

"He is the best coach in the history of Inter together with Helenio Herrera. He will stay until he wants to," said Moratti.

"The crowd will be very important (against Liverpool). We must play with character but also stay calm." Inter trail 2-0 from the first leg.

ARod stuns Novak

Tennis

AFP, Dubai

Andy Roddick, playing with a new lease of life, caused his second successive upset to reach the final of the Dubai Open on Friday when he added Novak Djokovic's scalp to his victory over Rafael Nadal.

The former world number one from the United States scored a tense and tenaciously chiselled out 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 victory over Djokovic, the third-seeded Australian Open champion from Serbia.

It followed another straight sets win on Thursday over Nadal, the second-seeded French Open champion from Spain.

The match hinged on one point in the tie-breaker and one break of serve in the second set, and might have taken a different course but for a mix-up two points from the end of the first set.

The umpire called a Roddick ace as a let, and repeated the call, but both players changed sides anyway, ready for the next point.

This decided the umpire to allow himself to be over-ruled, and he called the score as 6-4 and set point to Roddick, instead of 5-4, first serve.

Most people assumed both players had disagreed with the call, and that Djokovic was sportingly acknowledging it.

Afterwards however each of them claimed they had not heard the let call.

"The umpire is supposed to speak loud, not as though he were speaking to a mouse," said Djokovic.

"There are ten thousand people in there and I didn't hear it. It was an important point."

From 6-4 up, Roddick lost the next rally but won the second set point at 6-5 as Djokovic, from a useful position, hit a forehand drive wide.

"I don't think anyone heard it," Roddick said of the umpire's let call.

"This is new information for me. I don't know what to tell you."

The second set was also very tight, with Roddick, who returned serve soundly and played some well constructed rallies, making the crucial break in the penultimate game.

"I didn't use my opportunities when they were given to me. But it could have gone the other way if I had won the first set," said Djokovic.

"I was nervous because we were playing on a very fast court and he is going to rely on his service. I had to get back his service as much as I could, which is why I was nervous." But the best Djokovic could

manage against the fastest serve in the world was two break points in the first set; Roddick has yet to drop serve during this tournament.

Inevitably it was suggested to him that his surge in form might have been related to last week's split with Jimmy Connors, the legendary former player who had been his coach for the last year and a half.

"I don't know if this week is about Jimmy. I talked to him last night and he had a lot of things to say," claimed Roddick.

"But for a long time it has been John (Roddick, his brother), Doug (Spreen) and me on the road. It was nice hearing his voice but the grit of it was John, Doug and me."

In the final, Roddick will face Feliciano Lopez, the enigmatic Spaniard who had previously won only one match in five months, but who now completed his third-victory over a top ten player in a week.

Lopez made a last ditch comeback from 3-5 down to snatch an audacious 6-4, 4-6, 7-5 victory over Nikolay Davydenko, the world number five from Russia.

Nor was it a coincidence that Lopez should return to such spectacular form here - it is the same place where the first of his four finals happened, four years ago.

Jankovic crashes out

Tennis

AFP, Bangalore

Yan Zi of China upset world number four Jelen Jankovic of Serbia in three sets on Friday to storm into the semifinals of the 600,000-dollar WTA Bangalore Open here.

Yan, ranked 54th in the world, won 6-3, 3-6 and 6-3 as the top-seeded Jankovic struggled with a shoulder and neck injury during the third set of the quarterfinal match.

Yan, looking for her second career title, will take on fourth seed Patty Schnyder of Switzerland in Saturday's semifinal.

Schnyder, ranked 12th in the world, fought off a spirited challenge from unseeded Akgul Amanmuradova of Uzbekistan before winning 4-6, 6-4, 7-6 (7/1) in two hours and 25 minutes.

The other semifinal will feature the Williams sisters, Venus and Serena, who cruised to the last four with easy wins.

Second seed Venus brushed aside Vera Zvonareva of Russia 6-4, 6-3 before younger sister Serena, seeded third, crushed another Russian Anastasia Rodionova 6-1, 6-4.

Jankovic said the injury cost her the match, but admitted Yan deserved to win.

"For some reason, my right shoulder was a bit tight and my neck was painful," she said. "The pain became severe at the end of the second set."

"But Yan took her chances and won." Yan said she seized the chances that came her way and looked forward to her first semifinal in a tier-two event.

"Jelena was under pressure as a top seed, I had nothing to lose," the Chinese said. "I won the big points and am very happy because this is my first semi in a tier-two tournament."

"I have not played Patty before, but I know she spins big. I will just go on court and play my game."

The Williams sisters, playing for the first time on Indian soil, were excited over their semifinal showdown.

"I am happy that one of us will be in the final," said Venus.

Serena joked: "She is a tough player and the only chance of beating her is when she is injured. I want her leg to be broken."

"Venus is nice to me all the time except when she is on court. I am also very competitive and I always want to win. We will have fun tomorrow."

Schnyder said she was relieved after winning the third set tie-breaker against Amanmuradova.

"You never can tell when you get into a tie-breaker in the decider," said the Swiss. "So I am glad to get out of this one."

"I feel fit and I am going to be ready for the semifinal."

Hull want Okacha stay

AFP, London

English second tier side Hull could try and persuade Nigerian international veteran Jay-Jay Okocha to stay with them for another season.

Okocha hinted he may bring the curtain down on his career in May, at the age of 34, but he can invoke a clause in his contract that allows him to continue playing for the Championship side for another campaign.

"That's Jay-Jay's decision but if I can persuade him otherwise, and if I feel it's right to, then I'll have that conversation with him," manager Phil Brown told the Hull Daily Mail.

"The guy has had a fantastic career and if he does sign off, he'll sign off on a high. If he doesn't sign off, it'll be because he's on a high and he wants to play for another year."

Football

AFP, Sydney

Australia coach Pim Verbeek has attacked China's plan to play this month's World Cup qualifier at high altitude but said his team would respond to the challenge.

Verbeek said China were trying to make life difficult for Australia by playing the March 26 match in Kunming, "a place nobody has heard of", 1,900 metres (6,233 feet) above sea-level.

"Probably we will have the better players, so the only way (for China) to beat us is to make it as difficult as possible - and that's why they play in Kunming and not in Beijing or Shanghai," Verbeek told Saturday's Sydney Morning Herald.

"They're not stupid. On purpose they play at 1,900 metres, on purpose they ask us to travel longer than normal -- that's why we play in a place nobody has heard of."

"But on the other hand, I think that is a mistake, because our players are very willing to show it doesn't matter at all."

Verbeek, who watched China lose to South Korea and Japan in the recent East Asian Championships, said despite the difficulties, Australia will be playing for a win.

"At this moment, I go for three points. I don't go for a draw. The players want to show we have the better team, so we go there to win," he said.

China's 1-1 draw with Iraq and Australia's 3-0 win over Qatar last month gave Australia a head-start in the qualifying campaign for the 2010 World Cup, and Verbeek said all the pressure is on China and their new coach, Vladimir Petrovic.

"China is one of those countries where the fans definitely expect their team to win," he said. "And they have to win, because after the draw against Iraq, they have to beat us."

"They have a lot of new players in the team. They have had a very long preparation, and during that preparation, the coach sent out five or six players because he was not happy with them."

He added: "They will have 50,000 people making unbelievable noise, and that is good for us."

Verbeek said he will again focus on European-based players for his final squad, but will field a team largely of domestic A-League players in a warm-up match against Singapore on March 22.

Australia have beaten China five times in their seven previous meetings and won their last match 2-0 in Guangzhou in March 2007.

Bye bye Schuster?

INTERNET, Madrid

The big question floating through the early spring air in Spanish football right now is: could the days of Bernd Schuster as coach of Real Madrid be numbered?

Might Real be looking, in June, for what would be their ninth coach in five years?

Just two short months ago Schuster looked unshakable. Indeed, it seemed that he was the most successful Real coach since Vicente del Bosque (1999-2003) - and that he was destined to last even longer than the latter.

Club president Ramon Calderon was openly talking of extending Schuster's two-year contract in January, when the whites were nine points clear of Barcelona in La Liga and one of the favourites to go the distance in the Champions League.

But, to paraphrase former British prime minister Harold Wilson, two months are a very long time in football.

Nothing has gone right for Real this winter. They have lost seven of their 14 matches in 2008: three in

La Liga (away to Almeria and Betis, and at home to Getafe), twice at Mallorca in the King's Cup and, most importantly, twice to AS Roma in the Champions League.

The dream of an unprecedented "triple" have gone up in smoke - the same as Schuster's reputation for attractive attacking football and for calm self-control.

The German has disappointed Calderon and the "madridista" fans by his acerbic outbursts against referees and the media.

He raised eyebrows of astonishment on Wednesday night by claiming, bizarrely and perversely, that the meltdown against Roma "was not a defeat at all."

Schuster has never been the most likeable person in Spain, either as player or coach.

He earned himself the eternal enmity of the fans of Barcelona by running off alone to the airport when substituted during the 1986 Champions Cup final against Steaua Bucharest (which Barca lost on penalties) - then by jumping ship to join bitter rivals Real in 1988.