

Valencia midfielder Ruben Baraja (C) celebrates with teammates after scoring a stunning goal against Barcelona during their Copa del Rey semifinal at the Mestalla Stadium on Thursday.

'Humility the key to success'

REUTERS, Rome

Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro believes his country can emulate France by winning the European championships after lifting the World Cup, if they stay humble at Euro 2008.

"If we go to the European championships without too much euphoria, with humility and a desire to take advantage of our qualities, we are in the running," the Real Madrid defender told Friday's La Gazzetta dello Sport.

"The example (to follow) is that of France, who were good when winning the 1998 World Cup and lucky to double up at Euro 2000."

When Italy beat France in the final of the 2006 World Cup they avenged defeats they suffered to the French in the final of Euro 2000 and in the 1998 World Cup quarterfinals.

But Cannavaro said he was not satisfied with the payoff.

"I'm one of the few survivors (in the Italy team) of the Euro 2000 tournament in Belgium and the Netherlands and it is still sore," said the former World Player of the Year.

Italy are in the same group as France at Euro 2008, along with the Netherlands and Romania.

Ancelotti rubbishes Italy link

REUTERS, Rome

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti has dismissed speculation he is set to take over as Italy coach from Roberto Donadoni after Euro 2008.

"It pleases me to hear my name linked to the Azzurri bench, but I believe it is impossible," Ancelotti told a news conference on Friday. "I could only train the national team after 2010 (when my contract with Milan expires)."

"Donadoni deserves to stay, he is doing well and I hope he faces the European Championship with the utmost calm and takes the national team to the 2010 World Cup."

Thursday's Italian Soccer Federation statement that Donadoni's future would not be decided until after Euro 2008 in June had fuelled media speculation linking Ancelotti to the job.

Kaka set to miss Sweden match

REUTERS, Milan

AC Milan playmaker Kaka has ruled himself out for Brazil's friendly against Sweden in London on Wednesday because of a thigh injury.

"I definitely will not be able to play the friendly with my national team ... I suffered a muscular problem and now we'll see how much time is needed for me to be available again," the World Player of the Year told Milan's in-house TV channel on Friday.

"I am working to return as quickly as possible with physiotherapy and a little swimming to avoid running and harder movements in order to give the muscle chance to rest."

The 25-year-old pulled up with the injury during AC Milan's 2-1 home defeat by Sampdoria in Serie A on Wednesday.

COPA DEL REY

Valencia shock Barca

Football

REUTERS, Valencia

Valencia stunned Barcelona 3-2 at the Mestalla to reach the King's Cup final 4-3 on aggregate on Thursday.

Barca, who had scrambled an injury-time equaliser to draw 1-1 in the first leg, were hit by a Ruben Baraja piledriver and a breakaway goal from Juan Mata before halftime in an intense encounter they dominated throughout.

Substitute Thierry Henry pulled one back for Barca in the second half only for Mata to bag his second almost immediately and, although a late Samuel Eto'o goal set up a grandstand finish, it was no avail.

The victory relieves some of the pressure on coach Ronald Koeman who has seen Valencia drop out of Europe and the league title race

since he replaced Quique Sanchez Flores in November.

"It's ridiculous to say your fortunes change because of one game, but all teams need a little breathing space and hopefully this victory gives us that," said Koeman.

"It's a great night for Valencia who have suffered a lot recently." Valencia will meet Getafe on April 16, with a place in next season's UEFA Cup up for grabs, after Michael Laudrup's side booked a second consecutive appearance in the final with a 4-2 aggregate victory over Racing Santander on Wednesday.

The game followed the pattern of the first leg at the Nou Camp with Valencia successfully packing the midfield and looking to hit the visitors on the break.

Gabriel Milito's header from a corner was pushed against the crossbar early on as Barca pressed forward, but the opener came at

the other end when midfielder Baraja scored with a rasping drive from outside the area in the 18th minute.

The 24-times winners struggled to pass their way through Valencia's massed ranks and were hit in a swift counter-attack a minute before the break when David Villa fed Mata to finish inside the near post.

Frank Rijkaard turned to Henry after the restart and the France striker headed in off the post from Silvinho's cross in the 72nd minute, but almost immediately David Silva escaped on the right and crossed for Mata to volley past Victor Valdes.

Barca threw bodies forward and Cameroon striker Eto'o broke into the area to curl the ball inside the far post with 10 minutes remaining but it was not enough to stop Barca going out in the semis for the second season running.

'Mature' Cole praised

AFP, London



Chelsea coach Avram Grant has praised Ashley Cole for the "mature" way in which he apologised for his dreadful tackle on Tottenham defender Alan Hutton.

Cole apologised after Wednesday's 4-4 Premier League draw against their London rivals to Scotland defender Hutton and referee Mike Riley, whom he turned his back on when the official was trying to book him for the dangerous studs-up challenge on Wednesday at White Hart Lane.

Chelsea, who've been much criticised along with other leading teams for surrounding referees to complain about decisions given against them, were in the spotlight again Wednesday for the way in which Cole and England teammate Frank Lampard harassed Riley.

But Grant said the Football Association could cut down on the problem if they borrowed a long-standing rule from both rugby codes and made it clear that only the captain was allowed to talk to the referee.

"First you need to give credit to Ashley because he behaved like a mature guy," said Grant.

"He saw what he did the day afterwards and he apologised himself. Nobody pushed him to apologise and you need to give credit to him about that," the Israeli added.

"He made a tackle and he realised he needed to apologise about that and his behaviour. It is the first time he's done that kind of thing and he apologised."

"In football, unfortunately things happen, there are worse tackles than this."

"It's more important not to do it, I agree, but because it's football and it happens, it's more important to take responsibility."

"You need to give credit to a player who after only 24 hours saw it on TV and took responsibility for it."

Chelsea, five points behind leaders Manchester United and only two adrift of Arsenal, face their London title rivals on Sunday in what is sure to be a fiery encounter at Stamford Bridge.

But Grant said discipline was not an issue he would be lingering in his pre-match team talk.

"I don't think we need to speak especially about this before this game," said Grant.

"It's one of the things we always pay attention to. If you say we've never spoken about it before and now because it's Arsenal we should do, then no."

"I believe very much in discipline and I believe very much that you need to remind players but I don't think there is a problem in our team."

However, Grant said that Chelsea, fined three times this season for failing to control their players on the pitch, were unfairly singled out for special treatment.

"Sometimes it is like Chelsea players are always going to the referee and the other teams never do. But we are not the only team and that's why the rule needs to be more clear."

"But the rules need to be more clear about some things such as who can go to the referee and who cannot go to him."

"A rule where the captain can only go to the referee would be good and more clear for everybody because then everyone will respect it."

Barcelona reeling

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona have tried to put a positive gloss on their elimination from the King's Cup even though the competition presented their most realistic chance of winning a trophy this season.

Barca were eliminated at the semifinal stage for the second season in succession after losing 4-3 on aggregate to a troubled Valencia side and must now focus on trying to overhaul Real Madrid in the title race and winning the Champions League.

"It's a very heavy blow because we really wanted to reach the final," Barca coach Frank Rijkaard said after Thursday's game. "But I'm proud of the way the team fought out there."

"I can't complain about their attitude. They gave everything but we conceded too many goals and some of them were given away too easily."

Rijkaard's comments were echoed by club president Joan Laporta.

"We went out with dignity so I don't think it will damage our morale as much as it might have done," he said. "We have to look ahead as we are still in two important competitions and we know what we have to do."

"This team is still capable of winning the Champions League and even the league."

However, Laporta's comments did little to lift the gloom that has descended on the club in recent weeks.

Although leaders Real Madrid have lost four of their last seven league games, Barca have failed to take advantage and remain seven points adrift of their arch-rivals in the title race and only two clear of third-placed Villarreal.

They have made it into the last eight of the Champions League, where they will face Schalke 04, but an injury to live-wire Argentine forward Lionel Messi has overshadowed that achievement and

led to pessimism about their chances of winning the competition.

"More than a defeat, more than a Cup knockout, this looks the beginning of an unhappy ending," Barcelona daily Sport said in its editorial on Friday.

"This Barca looks to have past its sell-by date. Its football is no longer attractive, its results are disappointing and the team looks to have more of past than a future."

While the pressure is mounting on Barcelona, victory has eased the tension at trouble-torn Valencia.

"This was a very important victory for us because we've been through a very odd year. Let's hope we can bring the Cup back to Valencia," midfielder David Silva told reporters.

"This will give us some respite. It is a shame things aren't going as well in the league, but we have to keep battling away."

Valencia, who have won just two of their last 16 league matches, take on leaders Real Madrid at the Bernabeu on Sunday.

CHELSEA V ARSENAL

It's all or nothing

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger believes Arsenal's consistency will prove decisive as their Premier League title challenge enters a defining period.

The Gunners face Chelsea on Sunday knowing a win would effectively eliminate their London rivals from the race and keep Manchester United within touching distance.

But Wenger's side have no margin for error after four successive draws. A defeat at Stamford Bridge, combined with victory for United over Liverpool earlier in the day, would leave them six points behind the leaders.

It isn't a prospect that frightens Wenger. His team have lost only once in the league this season and the Frenchman is convinced they will win the title if that efficiency can be maintained over the final eight games.

"I feel that since the beginning of the season we have been the most consistent team," Wenger said. "We have lost just one game and that was under very special circumstances at Middlesbrough."

"That consistency will come out for good at the end of the season. I cannot imagine that will not play an important part in the final part of the season."

"If we win our big games and if we continue to be consistent then I am sure we will finish in front of the othersides."

"I cannot imagine we will lose the league if we have lost only one game at the end of the season."

Chelsea's formidable home record could intimidate lesser opponents but Wenger knows exactly what it takes to win at the Bridge.

Arsenal were the last team to leave Chelsea celebrating three points in the league back in February 2004, and he admits a repeat of that success would provide a major boost to his side's morale.

"It would be a psychological boost. We know the outcome of the championship will be down to the direct confrontations between the top teams. That's why we want to start those games well on Sunday," he said.

"We've got the strength of character to win the title, believe me. That's my belief, my firm belief and at the game on Sunday you will see."

"Since the first day of the season I have said that I believe in this team, come back in May and we will speak about it then."

"There's always a first time and until you win people have doubts about you, they're questioning you but the strong ones keep going."

While the stakes are high for Arsenal, there is absolutely no room for Chelsea to stumble again.

Avram Grant's side squandered a chance to keep the pressure on United and Arsenal by letting the lead slip three times in their 4-4 draw at Tottenham in midweek.

Now only a win on Sunday will do for the Blues and Grant must be

tempted to rush Nicolas Anelka back from injury. Anelka has missed the last two games but the France striker's record against Arsenal suggests he must feature if at all possible.

Anelka, 29, has scored six times in eight league games against his former club, although he would trade another goal for a much-needed victory.

"There is no secret, I am just lucky to score against them," he told Chelsea's website. "That is it, I'm not thinking when I play against them I have to score. If we have a chance to win it is good and even better if I score."

"Every time I played against them it was for a smaller club, so it was very difficult to beat Arsenal because it is a big club with big players, who played well as a team."

"But I managed to win once, so Sunday is an opportunity for two. It is an opportunity for Chelsea and because of what happened in the week we have to win the game. Everybody knows we have to win."

Benitez being bold

INTERNET, undated

Rafa Benitez cast aside his usual caution yesterday and boldly warned Manchester United: "We are going to beat you." The Liverpool manager normally fights shy of predictions but was adamant the force is with his improved team as they prepare to kick off a momentous double-header in the race for the Barclays Premier League title.

Benitez believes Liverpool now have enough firepower to hold sway and said: "We have come really close before, but we are better equipped now to go on and beat them. We have players who can change a game like Gerrard, Torres and Ryan Babel, players who can score goals."

"We always had a plan going to Old Trafford. We tried to do certain things but in the end we did not have enough power. We have now. They have match-winners in Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney and Carlos Tevez, but we have two or three who can do the same."

Steven Gerrard's potent partnership with Fernando Torres may pose the biggest threat to United's three-point lead at the top, but Benitez feels one-time Old Trafford target Javier Mascherano's midfield dynamism could prove just as important.

The Argentine, recently signed for 19 million pounds, will be on a mission to stop Cristiano Ronaldo and Benitez compared him to Roy Keane.

He said: "Javier is a strong character and leader and is the same kind of player as Keane. He is a key man for us who gives us balance, and his fantastic work-rate gives the likes of Torres and Gerrard the freedom to go forward."

The Liverpool boss also tipped his side to reach 100 goals for the season.

He added: "We have already scored 99, so we will watch a few videos of them and go there with a lot of confidence. We have the belief to go to Old Trafford and win."

'Put pressure on Gallas'

INTERNET, undated

Didier Drogha has cranked up the pressure ahead of Chelsea's Grand Slam Sunday clash with Arsenal by asking the Stamford Bridge crowd to unsettle William Gallas.

The Ivory Coast striker, who is looking forward to facing former Chelsea teammate Gallas and compatriot Kolo Toure, said: "William knows he is coming to the cauldron of Stamford Bridge, like with Ashley Cole [at Arsenal], he will be booed. But they are top players and I will need help from the crowd to unsettle William."

"Hopefully I will score on Sunday," he continued. "I will be against my mates but they also know it will not be easy for them."

Arsenal travel across the capital to Chelsea on the same day as Liverpool take on Manchester United at Old Trafford in what promises to be the pivotal weekend in the Barclays Premier League title race.

"It is going to be some weekend," the Chelsea striker told skysports.com. "The games are too close to call but our experience will be needed on Sunday."

Drogha, who was allegedly angry with Avram Grant's substitutions during the 4-4 draw at Tottenham on Wednesday, added "Arsenal are a wonderful team with the ball, but we are very powerful."

"At this time of the season you won't see any big scores between the teams because all the games are now pressure games."

"Hopefully we will come out stronger from the big encounters."

Battle of the Reds

AFP, Manchester



United manager Sir Alex Ferguson and the veteran boss wants the Portugal winger to maintain his "fantastic" form against arch-rivals Liverpool on Sunday.

Ronaldo took his tally for the season to 33 goals and in the process broke United legend George Best's club record for most goals in a single campaign by a winger by netting twice in Wednesday's 2-0 win over Bolton.

That victory left champions United three points clear at the top of the table from Arsenal and 11 in front of fourth-placed Liverpool ahead of Sunday's showdown at Old Trafford with their fellow Champions League quarterfinalists.

"His form is absolutely fantastic, there is no end to where we think he can go," an admiring Ferguson said of Ronaldo. "He has got the world in front of him," the Scot added.

"I want the boy to continue doing what he is doing and hopefully it'll be a successful season for the team."

Maria finally falls

Tennis

AFP, Indian Wells

Svetlana Kuznetsova handed Maria Sharapova her first defeat of 2008 on Friday to set up a clash with top-seeded Ana Ivanovic in the final of the Pacific Life Open.

Kuznetsova, the second seed, defeated fourth-seeded Sharapova 6-3, 5-7, 6-2 to return to the final of the 5.7 million-dollar WTA and ATP Masters Series tournament for the second straight year.

Serbia's Ivanovic defeated third-seeded compatriot Jelena Jankovic 7-6 (7/3), 6-3.

Last year Kuznetsova finished

runner-up to Daniela Hantuchova, whose title defense was halted by Sharapova in the quarterfinals.

That victory took Sharapova's record in 2008 to 18-0 - a sparkling run that included her Australian Open triumph as well as a victory in the WTA tournament in Doha last month.

Kuznetsova, 22 and ranked number three in the world, is in search of her first WTA title since New Haven last August, but she booked her third final of the year after reaching the championship match in Sydney in Dubai.

After dropping the first set, Sharapova gained an early break in the second en route to a 4-1 lead.

Kuznetsova broke back in the

seventh game, but Sharapova broke her again in the final game as Kuznetsova double-faulted on set point.

Kuznetsova bounced back to break Sharapova's serve in the first game of the third set, broke again for 4-1 and served out the match with a love game.

"I thought we both didn't play first set well," Kuznetsova said, adding that her chances in the second were thwarted by her own defensive stance.

Kuznetsova said three-time Grand Slam champion Sharapova was below her best, and her vanquished opponent agreed.

"I was playing with a much slower pace than I normally play with. I wasn't going for my shots as I normally do, and I wasn't seeing the ball that good," Sharapova said.

Sharapova, 20, said fatigue was a factor.

"I'm playing a lot of tennis, been flying a lot," she said. "It takes a toll on your body and your mind as well. You feel like you have to go out on the court and spend a lot of emotion and energy out there and sometimes you just don't have it for every match."

Ivanovic, whose runner-up finish to Sharapova at the Australian Open propelled her to number two in the world, posted her fifth victory over Jankovic in six meetings.

Jankovic said she felt strong in the rallies, but didn't serve or return effectively. She couldn't recover from a 0-6 deficit in the first-set tiebreaker, and surrendered her serve in the third game of the second.

Ivanovic broke her again in the ninth game to complete the victory.

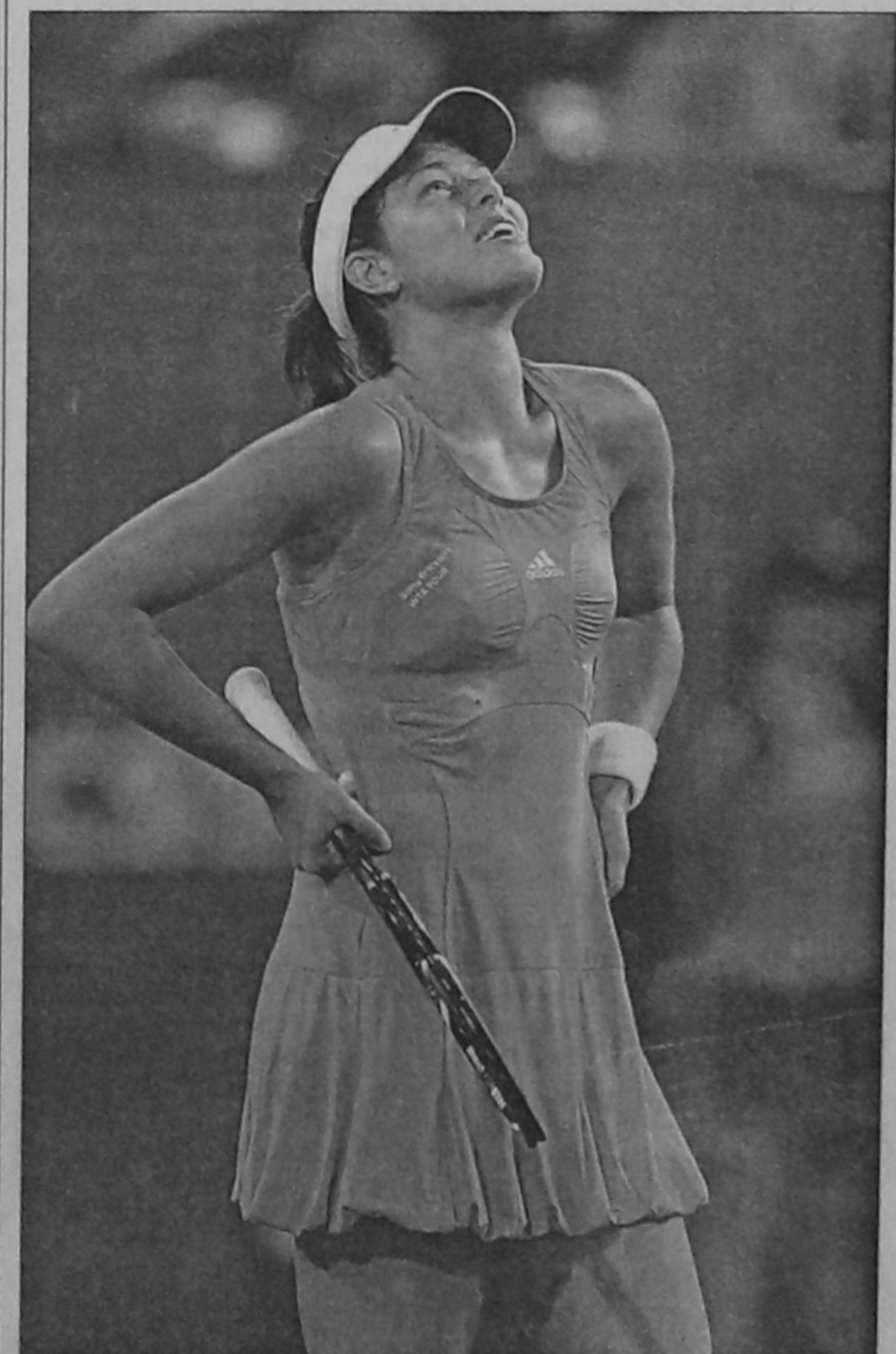
On the men's side, world number one Roger Federer moved into the semifinals without firing a shot as his scheduled quarterfinal opponent - unseeded German Tommy Haas - withdrew with a sinus infection.

In the semis, Federer will face unseeded American Mardy Fish, who had to fight his way into the final four.

Fish, ranked 98th in the world, fired 22 aces en route to a 6-3, 6-7 (5/7), 7-6 (7/4) win over seventh-seeded Argentinian David Nalbandian.

Fish, who has lost all five of his matches against Federer, joked that he hoped the Swiss superstar would be "a little too rested."

World number two and defending champion Rafael Nadal will take on number three Novak Djokovic, the reigning Australian Open champion, in the other semifinal, a rematch of their final here last year.



Serbian star Ana Ivanovic appears happy after winning a point against compatriot Jelena Jankovic during their Pacific Life Open semifinal at Indian Wells on Friday.