

Henin named WTA's best

AFP, Miami
Belgian world number one Justine Henin reaped yet another reward for her outstanding 2007 season on Thursday as she was named the WTA player of the year.

Henin, who also earned the honour in 2003, won 10 of the 14 tournaments that she started last year. She was unbeaten in 25 straight matches after falling to France's Marion Bartoli in the semifinals at Wimbledon.

Despite that All-England disappointment, Henin took her total of Grand Slam singles titles to seven in 2007, with victories at Roland Garros and the US Open.

She became the first woman in history to earn more than five million dollars in prize money in one year.

Serbian Ana Ivanovic, who won the prestigious WTA tier one title at Indian Wells on Sunday, was named the most-improved player.

The 20-year-old added three titles to her resume in 2007 to take her total to five. She became the first Serbian to reach a Grand Slam final when she finished runner-up to Henin at the French Open.

American Lindsay Davenport was named comeback player of the year, after returning to the courts in September three months after the birth of her first child, son Jagger.

She won 13 matches with just one defeat to close out the year, capturing titles at Bali and Quebec City and returning to the top 100 (73) for the 15th straight year.

Hungarian Agnes Szavay, 19, won the best newcomer award after capturing her first two career titles at Palermo and Beijing. She jumped from 185th place in the world rankings to 20th.

Mascherano admits FA's charge

REUTERS, London

Liverpool midfielder Javier Mascherano has admitted a Football Association charge of improper conduct and asked for a personal hearing, the FA said on Friday.

The Argentine was charged on Wednesday after being sent off in Sunday's 3-0 defeat at Manchester United. Mascherano reacted badly to the red card and had to be ushered off by Liverpool staff and team mates.

The hearing has been set for next Thursday, the FA said on its website (www.thefa.com).

Mascherano was sent off by referee Steve Bennett just before halftime. Already booked for a foul, the Argentine was shown a second yellow card in the 44th minute for questioning the booking of team mate Fernando Torres.

Mascherano, who played for Argentina in a friendly against Egypt in Cairo on Wednesday, is serving an automatic one-match suspension and misses the Merseyside derby against Everton at Anfield on Sunday.

He could be suspended for longer if declared guilty of improper conduct.

Metz deducted point for racism

REUTERS, Paris

Ligue 1 bottom club Metz will be docked a point and must play a home match behind closed doors after a racist incident there last month, the French Professional Football League (LFP) said on Thursday.

Morocco defender Abdeslam Ouaddou, the Valenciennes captain, was racially abused by a Metz fan during the Ligue 1 match at Metz on Feb. 16.

Metz said they would seek legal counsel over the League's decision.

"We are surprised by the harshness of the sanction," they said on their website (www.fcmetz.com).

"In the coming days, we will talk with our lawyers in order to find the best way to respond to this decision."

Metz now have 17 points from 30 matches and trail 17th placed Racing Lens, who are just above safety, by 17 points.

Altintop out for the season

AFP, Berlin

Turkey midfielder Hamit Altintop may miss June's Euro 2008 tournament after the Bayern Munich player underwent surgery for a foot injury on Thursday.

Altintop, 25, was injured playing for Turkey in the 2-2 draw with Belarus in Minsk on Wednesday night and will be out for the next six to seven weeks after surgery on Thursday to repair his broken metatarsal.

"That was a shock for me," said Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld on the Bayern website.

"Hamit Altintop was in dazzling form and had played well for us."

It is extremely doubtful Altintop will play for league leaders Bayern in the Bundesliga again this season and faces a race against time to be fit for Euro 2008.

Turkey have been drawn in Group A alongside the Czech Republic, Portugal and co-hosts Switzerland.



Serbian star Ana Ivanovic poses with her trophy after she was named the WTA's most-improved player in Miami on Thursday.

Crunch time now

AFP, Rome

AS Roma travel to lowly Cagliari on Saturday knowing victory would put them within a point of leaders Inter Milan, for a few hours at least.

Later in the evening the champions travel to Roma's city rivals Lazio in an intriguing match-up that already has conspiracy theorists pointing the finger at Lazio.

While the Romans would be loathe to help their neighbours' title push, they have their own ambitions, such as qualifying for the UEFA Cup next season, to look out for.

And Lazio's controversial president Claudio Lotito has pleaded with his team's fans to support their club and not wish for an Inter victory just to scupper Roma's dreams.

"Our fans need to support us and not try to bring bad luck on Roma," he told Radio Radio TV.

"It would be absurd for a person to want his own team to lose just so that the other club in the city doesn't win."

"Lazio fans should want the best for their club and hope for the best possible results."

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3-2 against Roma with a late strike from Swiss midfielder Valon Behrami.

They also face an Inter team in disarray, having won only two of their last eight matches, been dumped out of the Champions League by Liverpool and had their lead over Roma whittled down from 11 to four points over the last month.

Added to that there was the Roberto Mancini will he, won't he leave soap opera, that simply won't go away.

Mancini announced he was quitting at the end of the season after Inter's elimination by Liverpool, only to change his mind the next day.

But since then, press speculation has been rife over who will be in the Inter hot-seat next season, with former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho and current Fiorentina coach Cesare Prandelli seemingly the favourites.

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Press reports claim Inter president Massimo Moratti has met with both men.

"It's all rubbish," he said. "Despite what you (the press) report in your transmissions, nothing has happened."

"It's all things we would deny but we don't have the patience to do it anymore."

Moratti, though, is worried that the rumours could affect a team already struggling on the pitch.

"I hope these voices don't influence the game on Saturday. Against Lazio I expect a tough battle," said Moratti.

"What do I think will happen? That's not important, what counts is that the lads play well and bring home the three points."

There is a palpable feeling, though, that the Serie A title race is swinging Roma's way, despite their own injury and suspension problems.

Italy internationals Simone Perrotta and Daniele De Rossi, as well as Macedonia forward Mirko Vucinic are all suspended for the match while Brazilian defender Juan Jesus is injured.

In the race for fourth place and Champions League qualification next season, fifth-placed AC Milan host Atalanta on Sunday while fourth-placed Fiorentina, four points ahead of the reigning European champions, face a tricky trip to Udinese.

Bayern Munich have rediscovered their old swagger and are on course for a treble of league, German Cup and UEFA Cup.

"We started to have the look of champions," was the verdict of club manager Uli Hoeness, speaking to reporters after a 2-1 win over Bayer Leverkusen last weekend restored their seven-point lead.

"We're in a good position now, but we still have to be careful."

While Bayern have upped their game this season thanks in large part to how well new players like Franck Ribery and Luca Toni have done Nuremberg are in a sharp decline.

After winning the German Cup

and finishing sixth in the league last term, this season they are in desperate relegation trouble and sit second from bottom.

They can expect no favours from Bayern this time, according to Hoeness.

"We can't go to Nuremberg and hand out gifts to the neighbours," he said. "We want the title so we need to take points wherever we go."

Behind Bayern, five teams are chasing the two other Champions League places.

Hamburg SV are in second spot on 46 points, followed by Bayer Leverkusen, Werder Bremen and Schalke 04, all on 44. VfB Stuttgart, last season's champions, are also in with a chance with 41 points.

On Saturday, Hamburg are at home to struggling Arminia Bielefeld, Bayer host seventh-placed Eintracht Frankfurt, Werder are at home to bottom club Duisburg and Schalke travel to face mid-table Karlsruhe. Stuttgart are away to Hannover 96 on Sunday.

Hamburg will be without the suspended pair of Vincent Kompany and Joris Mathijsen, after their sendings-off in last weekend's 1-1 draw with Wolfsburg.

Italy still team to beat: Zoff

AFP, Rome

Despite Italy's 1-0 away defeat to Spain, former Azzurri international goalkeeper Dino Zoff insisted Thursday that the world champions will be the team to beat at Euro 2008.

And Zoff also claimed that Italy's Group D opponents Romania could be the dark horses of the tournament in Austria and Switzerland in June.

"Italy lost (to Spain on Wednesday) but they were convincing. Even if the Azzurri got nothing out of the final result, a defeat means nothing," said Zoff.

"We saw a great Italy team against a dazzling Spain."

Italy face Romania, France and the Netherlands in a so-called 'Group of Death' at the European Championships with many expecting Raymond Domenech's France to be Italy's closest challengers.

But Zoff is not convinced by Italy's western neighbours, particularly after their laboured 1-0 victory over England on Wednesday.

"Domenech's team didn't impress much, I didn't see anything exceptional about them."

"I don't know (Romania) well but they won comfortably (3-0) against Russia. I think they're one of the teams that could be a revelation in the tournament."

However, the team to beat is Italy. They are the favourites. Former Italy boss Arigo Sacchi said Italy's defeat to Spain, courtesy of a stunning volley from Valencia forward David Villa, could even work in the world champions' favour.

"Psychologically this defeat could do them the world of good. It will keep their feet on the ground," Sacchi told radio R101. "I think it's a result that is only partially negative."

"Generally I don't pay too much attention to the result. Yesterday in Elche I didn't see Italy struggling."

"I had positive feelings. This is a squad that, if it can maintain the right motivation, a certain humility and the right concentration, can only succeed at the Euros."

Podolski tired of the bench

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany striker Lukas Podolski will consider his future at Bayern Munich once the season is over after getting fed up with his role as a substitute.

"I've had it up to here with being on the bench," Podolski told Bild newspaper.

"I'll think about my future at the end of the season. We have to see whether it makes sense for either side."

Podolski, who has a contract running until 2010, joined Bayern from Cologne for 10 million euros (\$15.76 million) in 2006.

The 22-year-old has made just two starts for Bayern in the Bundesliga this season. He has made another 14 league appearances as a sub and has so far failed to score, although he has notched five goals in the UEFA Cup.

He is the club's third choice striker behind Miroslav Klose and Luca Toni yet remains an important part of the Germany squad and won rave reviews for a 32-minute appearance as a substitute in Wednesday's 4-0 win over Switzerland.

Pato delighted with debut

AFP, Rome

Teenage star Pato said Thursday he was delighted with his Brazil debut, where he scored the winner in a 1-0 success over Sweden in London on Wednesday.

Pato, 18, has made a huge impression on European football after also enjoying a goal-scoring debut for AC Milan in January.

"I'm delighted to have got on the pitch wearing the national team jersey for the first time," said Pato, who had to turn down a previous international call-up after suffering an ankle injury playing for Milan.

Pato has received glowing praise and has already been likened to Pele.

"I'm happy I scored and for the comparisons with Pele, who scored in the 1958 (World Cup) final against Sweden," he told the Milan TV channel. "For me, he is a hero, a phenomenon."

"Right now my career is going well and I have to keep working hard to continue my journey with the Brazil national team."

First, though, Pato has to turn his attentions to helping Milan overhaul fourth-placed Fiorentina in Serie A, despite trailing the Viola by four points in the race for the last Champions League qualifying position.

"Now in the league we have to reach our aim of fourth place so we can play in the Champions League next season," he said.

Battle for fourth spot

REUTERS, London

Liverpool head into the Merseyside derby at Anfield on Sunday (1500) knowing that victory would just about kill off Everton's hopes of Champions League football next season.

Liverpool occupy the vital fourth place - worth a slot in the Champions League qualifiers - on 59 points, two ahead of Everton with a superior goal difference of nine.

With only six games remaining after this weekend, the Blues can ill-afford to slip up.

However, while Everton's attention is focused on the league run-in, Liverpool will be diverted by the Champions League, where they face Arsenal twice either side of another meeting with them in the league in the first eight days of April.

If Liverpool do go on to reach a third final in four seasons, Everton fans will have a bigger incentive than usual to will them to lose if their side finish fourth in May. A Liverpool win would guarantee them a Champions League return at Everton's expense.

Liverpool won the Champions League in 2005 but were pipped by Everton for fourth spot in the league and needed a UEFA rule

change to allow them to enter the following season's competition in the qualifying rounds.

UEFA then amended the regulations to ensure there was no repeat of a country having five clubs in the group stage.

This will probably not be necessary if Liverpool repeat their controversial victory at Goodison Park in October, when Dirk Kuyt scored two penalties in a 2-1 win that has left Everton fans seething ever since.

The Dutchman had been lucky to escape a red card for an earlier wild lunge at Phil Neville, while Everton, who finished with nine men, were furious that their own clear claim for a late penalty was turned down.

"It's an important game, there's no doubt about that," Kuyt told Liverpoolfc.tv. "The derby is always

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)
Saturday
Birmingham v Manchester City, Bolton v Arsenal, Derby v Fulham, Manchester Utd v Aston Villa (1615 GMT), Portsmouth v Wigan, Reading v Blackburn, Sunderland v West Ham
Sunday
Chelsea v Middlesbrough (1230 GMT), Liverpool v Everton (1500 GMT), Tottenham v Newcastle (1400 GMT)

big but this one is going to be really big. Everton deserve to be where they are at the moment but fifth will be okay for them this season."

Both sides dropped points last week as Liverpool lost 3-0 to Manchester United and Everton were held to a 1-1 home draw by West Ham United having lost at Fulham in their previous game.

Everton, who have a seven-point cushion over sixth-placed Portsmouth, are aiming higher than another crack at the UEFA Cup, which they exited on penalties to Fiorentina two weeks ago.

"It shows how far we have come that we are looking up at Liverpool in fourth rather than down," goalkeeper Tim Howard told www.evertonfc.com.

Manchester United can extend their lead to eight points at home to Aston Villa on Saturday (1715) with second-placed Chelsea not hosting Middlesbrough until Sunday (1200).

Last weekend's matches swung things heavily in favour of United retaining the title just a few weeks after Arsenal led - a run of four draws and a defeat, Sunday's 2-1 reverse at Chelsea, leaves them six points adrift of the leaders.

Arsene Wenger's team have slipped to third on 67 points, one behind Chelsea, and face an awkward Saturday trip (1500) to Bolton Wanderers where they have lost on their last three league visits and drawn the two before that.

Signs bad for Trezeguet

Football

REUTERS, Paris

Striker David Trezeguet's chances of securing a place in France's Euro 2008 squad were damaged on Wednesday after his teammates failed to provide him with any service during the 1-0 friendly win over England.

The game at the Stade de France was the last before coach Raymond Domenech unveils his 23-man squad for June's finals in Austria and Switzerland but Trezeguet, who has a lot to prove, failed to make any impression on a dull match.

"His life with Les Bleus looks like his 'wilderness years' in a team that seem to ignore him," said sports daily L'Equipe. "We cannot write that his team mates deliberately forgot him on the pitch. But it looked so much like they did."

The Juventus striker only received five passes in the first half, most in his own half, with midfielders Florent Malouda and Franck Ribery unable to get the ball to him more often.

The Chelsea winger and the

Bayern Munich midfielder had more luck finding striker Nicolas Anelka who produced a much more convincing performance and forced England goalkeeper David James to concede a penalty just after the half-hour mark.

Trezeguet, who is impressive in the air, would probably be happier playing alongside England centurion David Beckham. He clearly missed right back Willy Sagnol, who seems to be one the few French players able to provide decent crosses.

Jerome Rothen could be the answer, with his ability to deliver accurate centres, but the Paris St Germain winger played for the France B team in Tuesday's 3-2 win over Mali.

Without any support Trezeguet, recalled to the squad for the first time since the 1-0 home defeat by Scotland in a Euro 2008 qualifier last September because of an injury to Olympique Lyon's Karim Benzema, was left on his own up front.

Trezeguet has scored 112 goals in 179 Serie A matches with Juventus and has 34 from 71 caps with France, including the Euro 2000 golden goal against Italy in the final.

The 30-year-old, who now is only an outside bet to be included in the squad for Euro 2008, put on a brave face despite being a peripheral figure in an efficient France win.

"We are happy with this victory..." he said. "When we attacked it was a bit strange because maybe we didn't bring the ball forward quickly enough and we somehow failed with the last pass. But the most important thing was to win this game."

Trezeguet was given a warm ovation by the crowd when he was replaced by Lyon forward Sidney Govou after 64 minutes.

By contrast, Olympique Marseille's Djibril Cisse, who is competing with the Juventus striker for a place in the Euro 2008 squad, was booed when he replaced Anelka 10 minutes from time.

Trezeguet said: "I was very proud of the ovation when I was replaced, it was touching. The fans and myself have had a long relationship, they know that I always give it all when I play with the France shirt. This ovation helps me a lot."

Ominously, though, Domenech added: "I don't listen to it (the crowd's reactions) anymore."

Real aim to end crisis

REUTERS, Madrid

After losing five of their last eight games, Spanish leaders Real Madrid are determined to dispel talk of a crisis by beating Sevilla at home on Sunday (kick-off 1900 GMT).

The alarm bells have been ringing at Real since suffering a second defeat in a row with their 3-2 loss at home to Valencia last weekend and they are now just four points ahead of arch-rivals Barcelona in the standings.

But Dutch winger Arjen Robben believes the result against Valencia did not do his team justice.

"Yes, it was a big disappointment, but we played well and deserved to win," said the former Chelsea player. "We had a lot of chances and just failed to take them. I don't think we are in crisis."

Sevilla, whose hopes of earning a place in next season's Champions League were dented with a 2-1

home defeat by Atletico Madrid last week, are anxious to exploit any anxiety on the part of Real.

"Real aren't very consistent at the moment and we can take advantage of that," said Sevilla striker Frederic Kanoute. "It will be difficult for us at their ground because they have some quality players but it is the sort of game we like playing."

Sevilla crushed Real 5-3 at the Bernabeu in the Spanish Super Cup at the start of the season and they won 2-0 when the two teams met at the Sanchez Pizjuan in November.

FIXTURES

(all 1600 GMT unless stated)
Saturday
Real Betis v Barcelona (1900 GMT), Villarreal v Atletico Madrid (2100 GMT)
Sunday
Espanyol v Racing Santander, Valladolid v Real Zaragoza, Valencia v Real Mallorca, Almeria v Levante, Getafe v Osasuna, Deportivo La Coruna v Real Murcia (1900 GMT), Real Madrid v Sevilla (2000 GMT)

Barcelona, who won their first game in four when they beat Valladolid 4-1 last weekend, take on Sevilla's city rivals Real Betis on Saturday, but the venue of the game is still in doubt as they are due to start a two-match stadium ban.

Continued speculation about the future of the out-of-form Ronaldinho has overshadowed Barca's preparations for the match.

The Brazilian is unlikely to play against Betis because of muscle pain, while centre-back Gabriel Milito is another injury doubt.

Villarreal, unbeaten in eight games and now only two points behind Barcelona in third, face a test of their title ambitions at home to fourth-placed Atletico Madrid on Saturday.

"It is a key match," said fullback Joan Capdevila. "It is a six pointer because they are direct rivals."

"I think we will have the better of them on the head-to-heads and we will be almost certain of a place in the Champions League. We can even think about winning the league."

'Ronaldinho's time is up'

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Ronaldinho's time at Barcelona is at an end, according to the club's former coach Carles Rexach.

"The Ronaldinho era is over," Rexach was quoted as saying in sports daily Marca on Friday.

"I thought things could be sorted out, but now everyone is putting their ear in against him and it seems as though he is angry with the club."

"There is no way out of the situation," Rexach, a former Barcelona player who coached the team in 1991 and again from 2001-2002, said the club was partly to blame.

"The directors of the club

should have done a little more," he said. "They gave him too much leeway, they should have sorted things out earlier on."

A succession of injury and fitness problems, added to media speculation about late-night partying, led to reports Barcelona were prepared to offload Ronaldinho at the end of the season.

However, Barcelona President Joan Laporta has denied there is a rift between player and club.

Ronaldinho's agent, his brother Roberto de Assis, said the former World Player of the Year was being made a scapegoat for the club's failures in the past two seasons.

"When things are not going well in a big club like Barcelona then it is understandable that they look for people to blame, but my brother is not the only person responsible for

this situation," De Assis told RAC 1 radio on Friday.

De Assis also denied reports that he was prepared to invoke article 17 of the FIFA transfer regulations to leave the club at a knockdown price at the end of the season.

"It hasn't entered our heads to leave under article 17," he said. "We have not made any threat to use it to leave the club."

The article effectively permits players to break contract after three years if they signed under the age of 28 provided they notify their club within 15 days of the last match of the season.

Players have to pay compensation calculated using a formula based on wages and their original transfer fee but it is almost always a substantially lower figure than their market value.