

Zidane cancels Aussie trip

AFP, Sydney

Three-time world footballer of the year Zinedine Zidane has pulled out of his trip to Australia, forcing the cancellation of Sunday's exhibition match here, organisers said Thursday.

Zidane was promoted to lead a team featuring his French 1998 World Cup-winning teammates, including Marcel Desailly and Robert Pires, against an Australian All-Stars team.

But the 35-year-old football star pulled out of his Australian visit on Thursday, citing personal reasons, a spokeswoman for the event said.

"It would be like going to see LA Galaxy without (David) Beckham," she said, adding that she expected most people would seek a ticket refund if the French superstar was not involved.

Zidane arrived with other members of France's 1998 squad in the French territory of New Caledonia on Wednesday, where they were expected to play in an exhibition on Saturday.

Jankulovski best Czech player

AFP, Prague

AC Milan defender Marek Jankulovski was Wednesday voted Czech footballer of the year in a poll of players and coaches in Prague.

Jankulovski, 31, saw off Chelsea keeper Petr Cech and Arsenal midfielder Tomas Rosicky, the latter who will miss Euro 2008 through injury.

Jankulovski, formerly with Banik Ostrava, Napoli and Udinese, has won 63 caps, scoring ten times for his country.

Czech veteran coach Karel Bruckner, 68, was voted coach of the season while Eintracht Frankfurt striker and under-20 world championship runner-up Martin Fenin was elected budding talent of the year.

Having already seen off Lithuania this week in a friendly to open their Euro warm-up programme the Czechs will host Scotland on Friday and then head off to their Austrian base of Seefeld on June 2.

The 1996 runners-up will face tournament co-hosts Switzerland, Portugal and Turkey in their Group A pool games.

Fergie, Queiroz found innocent

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson and his assistant Carlos Queiroz were found not guilty of improper conduct by the Football Association on Wednesday.

The pair had been charged in relation to comments made following United's FA Cup defeat to Portsmouth on March 8.

Ferguson had described referee Martin Atkinson as a "disgrace", declaring that his performance "should not be accepted in our game", after he denied United a penalty for Sylvain Distin's block on Cristiano Ronaldo.

Atkinson also sent off United goalkeeper Tomasz Kuszczak for bringing down Milan Baros and Ferguson claimed that the referees' chief, Keith Hackett, was "not doing his job properly" and picked his "favourites" for United's matches.

Queiroz was just as scathing about Atkinson, saying: "I feel sorry that the game has moved to the situation where referees deserve red cards."

"This referee deserves somebody to come to the side of the pitch after five minutes, give him a red card and pull him out of the game."

Zambrotta on way to Milan

AFP, Rome

World Cup-winning Italian full-back Gianluca Zambrotta could soon be joining the ranks of giants AC Milan, if the club can agree terms with Barcelona.

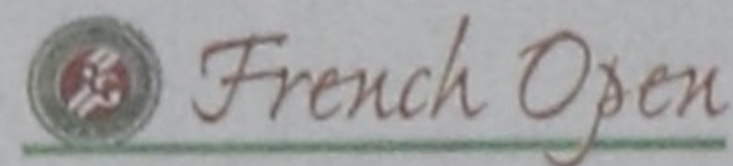
"The difference is two million euros. The player hopes to come to Milan and the Barcelona management is aware of it," said a spokesman from an Italian football association.

"But Barca is an extremely expensive 'boutique'. They have no sooner opened the bidding than they are up 30, 40, or 50 million -- figures that are not compatible with any budget," he added.

The Italian club last week signed France's rising star Mathieu Flamini, after the 24-year-old refused to sign a new contract with Arsenal.

AC Milan failed to make the cut for next season's Champions League competition after finishing fifth in the Scudetto, and will now compete in the UEFA Cup.

Nadal storms through



AFP, Paris

Defending champion Rafael Nadal eased into the French Open third round on Thursday with a 6-4, 6-0, 6-1 win over French qualifier Nicolas Devilder.

The second seeded Spaniard will now face Finnish 26th seed Jarkko Nieminen for a place in the last 16.

Earlier seeds David Nalbandian and James Blake were sent crashing out of the French Open at the second round stage on Thursday.

If the seventh-seeded Blake's 7-6 (7/2), 3-6, 7-5, 6-3 loss to Ernests Gulbis of Latvia was only a minor upset, given his dislike for clay, sixth seed Nalbandian's 3-6, 4-6, 6-2, 6-1, 6-2 collapse at the hands of French wildcard Jeremy Chardy was a shocker.

The burly Argentinian had been touted as one of the main threats in the way of a third straight final between Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer even though his form of late had been poor.

He raced into a two sets lead, but then Chardy, the world 145, playing in only his sixth ATP Tour-level event at the age of 21, stepped up the pace and dominated exchanges from the baseline.

His win brought some relief to slumping home hopes at Roland

Garros and he next goes up against Dmitry Tursunov of Russia with a place in the last 16 beckoning.

Blake had been the flag-bearer of an American revival at the French Open, but he was always in trouble up against Gulbis, the first Latvian to play at the top level in tennis.

"I felt like I could have won this match and had better success here," the 28-year-old Blake said after failing to match his run into the third round here in 2006.

"Now I have to forget about this and move forward and figure out what happened in time for the grasscourt and hardcourt season."

In the women's tournament, third seed Jelena Jankovic reached the third round, but saw her hopes of lifting a first Grand Slam hit by a painful injury to her right forearm and elbow.

The 23-year-old Serb defeated Croatian-born New Zealander Marina Erakovic 6-2, 7-6 (7/5), but she needed extensive treatment to relieve the pain halfway through the second set.

The pain started at the beginning of the second set and it was getting worse and worse," Jankovic said after injury.

"The balls were heavier from hitting a lot of them my arm got very tight. I started having pain and it is swollen. The trainer came on and helped me get to the end."

There were no such problems for Venus Williams who powered past Tunisian qualifier Selima Sfar 6-2, 6-4 to join sister Serena in the third round. They could potentially meet in the semifinals.

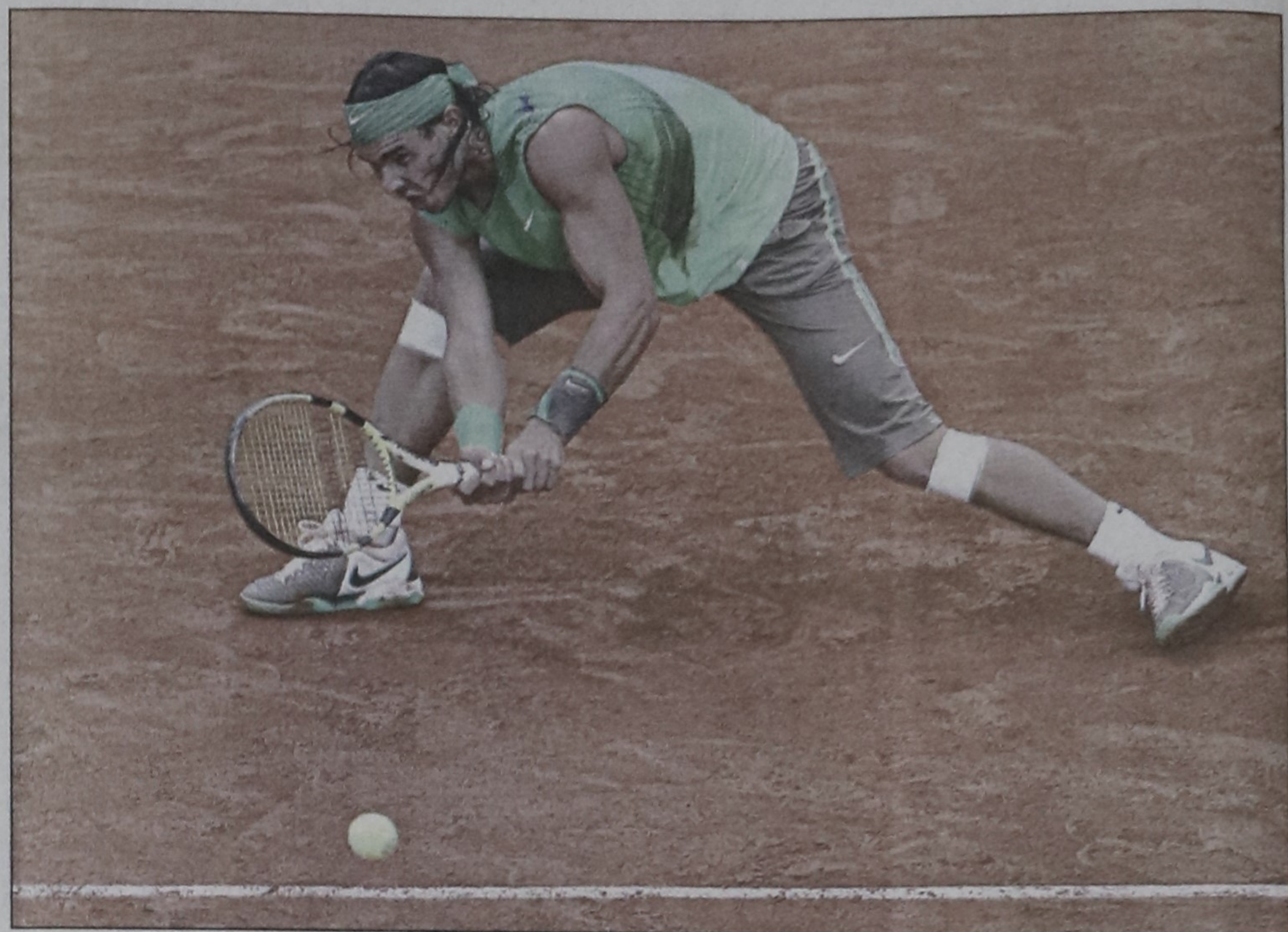
Chinese hopes slumped with the defeat of Peng Shuai, who lost her second round tie 6-4, 6-3 to experienced Czech player Iveta Benesova.

Peng, the world number 64, was trying to make the last 32 for the first time in three visits but she was completely outplayed by Benesova who had to qualify and marked her determination by knocking out compatriot and 15th seed Nicole Vaidisova in the first round.

Zheng Jie, who made the fourth round on her Roland Garros debut in 2004, will try to keep Chinese interest in the singles alive when she faces Russia's 21st seed Maria Kirilenko.

Last up on the Court Suzanne Lenglen was women's top seed Maria Sharapova who came within two points of losing in the first round on Wednesday to Russian teen Evgeniya Rodina before scraping through in three sets.

The world No.1 was drawn against Bethanie Mattek of the United States who had won just two games in her previous 10 Grand Slam tournament appearances.



Spanish star Rafael Nadal bends to make a forehand return against French player Nicolas Devilder during their French Open second round match at Roland Garros in Paris yesterday.

'Dropping stars was tough'

AFP, Tignes



France coach Raymond Domenech admitted the toughest thing for him ahead of the Euro finals had been to drop seven men from his initial squad and he was still suffering from the aftermath.

"I'm not here to explain why. I'm still too emotional. I've experienced the toughest time of my career as coach," said Domenech at the team's national training centre.

"There are moments when, even though the emotional bonds are there, the professional side must take precedence."

"Seven left and 23 stayed. I am still feeling the emotion."

Sure that the unlucky seven would want to hear their fate individually rather than before the group Domenech went to each.

"I told the group that I would knock on their doors and the decision would be waiting for them. It was difficult and heavy, with lots of emotion," Domenech said.

The chosen 23 reacted "as I had hoped, with the best interests of the squad at heart."

"I wanted the rest of the players to be in the hall of the hotel to give their support to the players who were leaving."

"It was a real group moment. The seven did not sink out."

Domenech, who had already made clear his distaste for Juventus striker and 1998 World Cup winner David Trezeguet by dismissing his claims to a place in the 23 despite the veteran's record, also omitted Marseille's former Liverpool striker Djibril Cisse and Paris Saint-Germain keeper Mickael Landreau.

For Cisse it was the third successive time he has missed out on a major tournament.

Domenech, who included six Premiership players for next month's championships, also left out Julien Escude, Philippe Mexes, Alou Diarra, who played in the 2006 World Cup final, and two of the young stars Mathieu Flamini, who recently signed for AC Milan from Arsenal, and Hatem Ben Arfa.

Cisse did himself no favours with a lowkey performance in France's warm-up friendly against Ecuador on Tuesday. He was booed by the crowd after missing a header.

His omission will be all the harder to take as he also missed the 2006 World Cup after breaking his leg in a friendly on the eve of

France's departure for Germany when bang in form and the Euro 2004 through suspension after a punch-up.

Newcomer Bafetimbi Gomis, a striker with St Etienne, was a surprise inclusion with the likes of Cisse and Trezeguet missing out but the 22-year-old youngster showed his mettle with both goals on his debut in Tuesday's win over Ecuador.

Domenech will have to stand firmly by his convictions as France have an awkward Group C, comprising World Cup final conquerors Italy, 1988 champions The Netherlands and Romania.

Domenech said on Wednesday he was still getting over his shaping of the final squad.

"A stage has been vaulted but I think it will take some hours yet to get over it. It's difficult for me and still more so for the players and that reinforced what I felt."

He added the seven left off -- they were given a helicopter out of the training camp to avoid having to run a media gauntlet -- would nonetheless remain on standby.

"We can call them at a day's notice -- they are ready if need be."

"Meanwhile the other 23 have a responsibility towards the seven who have left."



French players Franck Ribery (L), Karim Benzema (C) and Thierry Henry (R) jog during a training session in Tignes on Wednesday.

Messi eager for Brazil rematch

REUTERS, Buenos

Argentina's World Cup qualifier against Brazil next month would be the ideal opportunity to reverse some poor results against their South American opponents, forward Lionel Messi said on Wednesday.

Barcelona's Messi has had memories against the five-times world champions, being on the wrong end of three-goal defeats in his first two meetings against them.

He played when Argentina lost 3-0 to Brazil in a friendly in September 2006 in London and when they were beaten by the same score in last year's Copa America final in Venezuela.

Previous to that, Brazil beat Argentina 4-1 at the Confederations Cup final in Germany in 2005 when Messi did not play.

"We're very eager for this game," Messi told reporters at Buenos Aires airport. "In the last two matches, they have beaten us badly and we hope that this time it will be different."

Brazil host Argentina in a World Cup qualifier on June 18 in Belo Horizonte.

Messi said that he hoped to play in the Olympic games in August, although he also wanted to play for Barcelona.

"I want to play at the Games but I also want to help my club, because I want the best for both teams and both are important to me," he said.

Messi is also in the squad for the friendlies against Mexico in San Diego on June 4 and against United States in New York four days later.

Russia warm-up with Serbia win

AFP, Moscow

Russia recorded a 2-1 win in a Euro 2008 warm-up match with Serbia played in the German town of Burghausen on Wednesday.

Recently crowned UEFA Cup winners Zenit St Petersburg's marksman Pavel Pogrebnyak and Spartak Moscow striker Roman Pavlyuchenko scored one apiece for Russia, while Hertha Berlin striker Marko Pantelic was on target for Serbia.

Both opponents looked slightly rusty from the start, producing a catalogue of unforced errors in the opening 10 minutes.

But in the 12th minute Russia went into a 1-0 lead through Pogrebnyak, who fired a 35-metre freekick inside the left post, the ball flying in off the woodwork.

Six minutes later Pantelic missed a clear chance to equalise, heading over the crossbar from six yards from Dejan Milovanovic's well-struck freekick.

Russia dominated the play but Pantelic nevertheless levelled at 1-1 five minutes before the break, clipping in from close range past helpless goalkeeper Igor Akinfeyev following a Russian mix up in defence.

Russia replied positively and began peppering Serbia's goalie Vladimir Dislenkovic with shots but failed to restore their lead before the interval.

But three minutes after the restart Pavlyuchenko made it 2-1, firing in from seven metres following a short Dmitry Sychev cross from the left.

In the closing stages Russia were in control, stifling Serbia's attacking efforts and easily holding their advantage to the final whistle.

Guus Hiddink's Russia open their Euro 2008 campaign against Spain on June 10 followed by holders Greece (June 14) and Sweden (June 18) in the group stage.

Iraq cheers ban lift

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqis celebrated on Thursday after world football governing body FIFA lifted the threat of a 12-month ban, clearing the way for the Asian champions to play a key World Cup qualifier against Australia this weekend.

Fans gathered around radios and television sets in their thousands to hear the news that FIFA had relented on its threat to suspend Iraq from international competition after the government announced that an order dissolving the Iraqi Olympic Committee did not apply to the Iraqi Football Association.

"After we received the news that our team is to be allowed to go on to the next match, we started to feel better," said secondary school pupil Ahmed Abdel Jabbar. "Our spirits are up again," he said.

Iraq need to salvage at least a

point from the game to keep their hopes alive of advancing to the next stage of Asian qualifying for the 2010 World Cup.

They are currently bottom of their group with just a point while Australia lead with four points from two matches. China and Qatar are the group's other two teams.

But the omens are not good. Before heading to Australia on Tuesday for Sunday's game, Iraq played a warm-up match against Thailand which they lost 2-1.

Tariq Ahmed, head of the Iraqi Football Association's arbitration committee, said the players needed to put the worries of the past week behind them and concentrate on winning the game for the fans.

"They have a chance to realise the hopes of millions of Iraqis who love the game," Ahmed said. "They must win Sunday's game to erase all the negative publicity we received."

Iraq need to salvage at least a

Terry smiling again

AFP, London

John Terry finally had something to smile about as he marked his return as England captain with a goal in Wednesday's 2-0 friendly win over the United States.

Just seven days after Terry was inconsolable after his penalty miss cost Chelsea the Champions League final against Manchester United.

But Fabio Capello gave the defender a much-needed boost by handing him the skipper's armband for the first time since September and he responded by heading England's first half opener at Wembley.

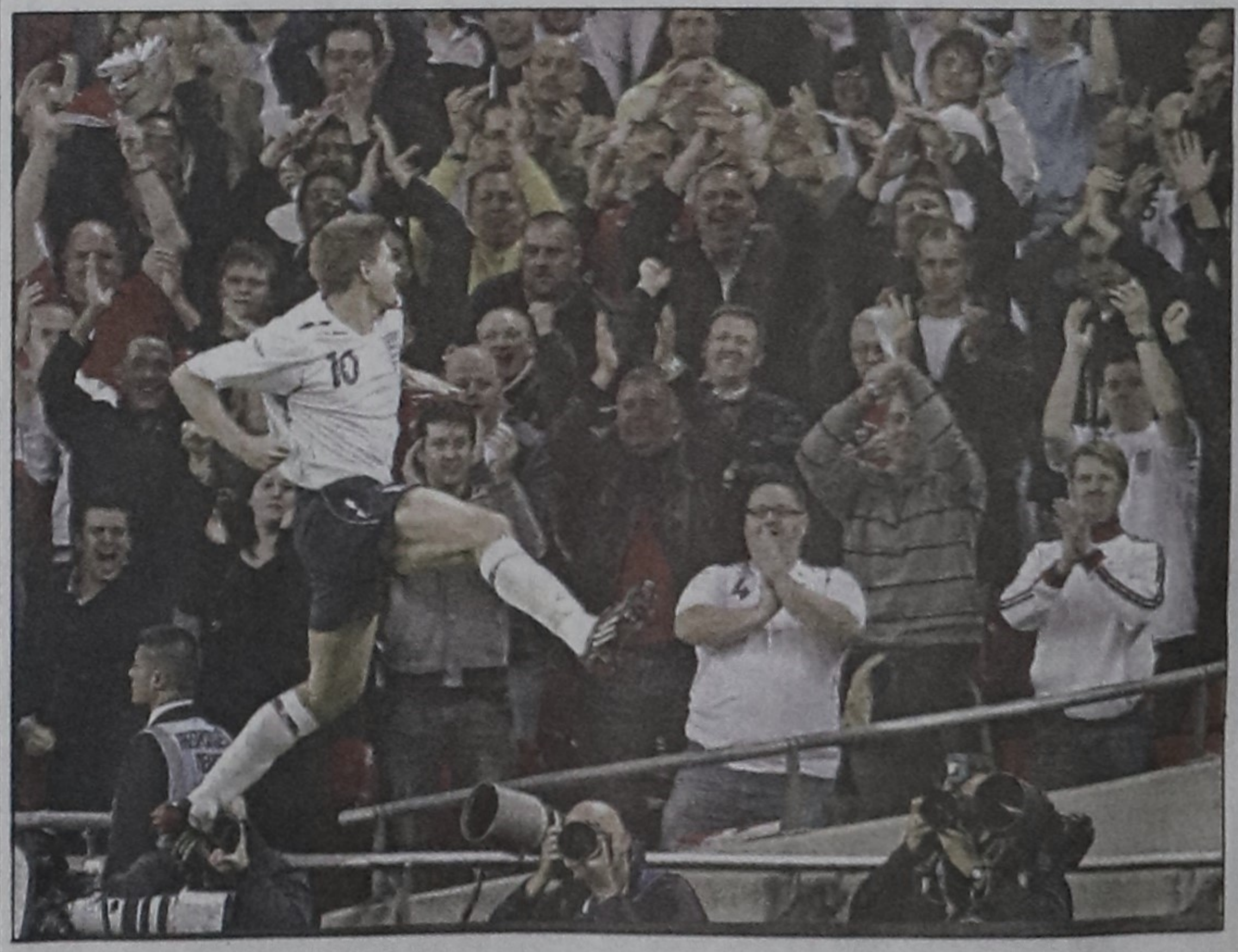
Terry is desperate to regain the

England captaincy on a permanent basis after watching Steven Gerrard and Rio Ferdinand lead the team in Capello's first two matches. So this was the perfect way to stake his claim and wipe away the tears shed in Moscow last week -- though it will need a more significant win than this against weak opposition to totally erase the scars.

Gerrard's strike after the break sealed Capello's second win as England coach, although the Italian must realise there is still plenty of room for improvement after a performance that could be described as workmanlike at best.

Terry admitted his goal was perfectly timed to lift his Russian blues: "That goal was for all the Chelsea fans for last week," he said.

"It's been a difficult week since



England midfielder Steven Gerrard goes airborne to celebrate his goal against USA during their international friendly at the Wembley Stadium on Wednesday.

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