

Fletcher, the unlikely hero

AFP, Portsmouth



Darren Fletcher was the unlikely goal hero for the second match in a row as Manchester United got their Premier League title defence up and running with a 1-0 victory at Portsmouth on Monday.

But the sooner Dimitar Berbatov becomes an Old Trafford player the better for Sir Alex Ferguson.

"We'll just have to wait and see what happens with that," was all Sir Alex would say on the subject afterwards as he spoke to Sky Sports, neatly batting away the question of new potential recruits before the transfer window closes on September 1.

Fletcher handed United their first win of the season with a fortuitous 32nd-minute strike, which may yet be credited as a Sylvain Distin own goal, as the champions produced another toothless attacking display.

Ferguson nonetheless was able to look on the bright side.

"We played some excellent football. It's a difficult place to

come. Last year we drew here, the year before we lost, so it's a bonus," said the United boss.

"We tried to get a system where the players were comfortable in their positions. We used the players in the right way."

United welcomed back Carlos Tevez after the Argentine missed their 1-1 opening day draw with Newcastle due to a family bereavement.

Injured star midfielder Cristiano Ronaldo remained on the sidelines.

Portsmouth, who paraded the FA Cup in front of the Fratton Park fans before kick off, handed an immediate debut to French left back Armand Traore following his loan move from Arsenal.

Senegal midfielder Papa Bouba Diop came close to giving Harry Redknapp's side a dream start when he shot inches wide of Edwin Van der Saar's right hand post with only ten seconds on the clock.

Paul Scholes forced David James into his first meaningful save in the 19th minute with a swerving 30-yard piledriver, which saw the veteran goalkeeper dive full length to his left to keep out.

Peter Crouch should have put Portsmouth in front six minutes later after being presented with a golden chance by some comical United defending.

Scholes inexplicably smashed a 40-yard back pass straight into touch and a quick throw-in set Jermaine Defoe away down the left.

Defoe's cross bounced off Patrice Evra to the feet of Nemanja Vidic, who slipped in front of Crouch, but the former Liverpool striker shot straight into the chest of United goalkeeper Edwin van der Saar.

United were given another let off from the resulting corner when Younes Kaboul was left totally unmarked only to head wide from Sean Davis's centre.

The European Cup holders finally showed their class by taking the lead 13 minutes before half time, albeit with a huge helping hand from Portsmouth defenders Sol Campbell and Distin.

Patrice Evra was played through by Tevez on the left wing and whipped in a teasing low cross, which Campbell played against Fletcher's knee and a desperate Distin could only lash the ball into the roof of his own net from the

goaline.

Rooney was furious with himself for not extending the lead in the 41st minute. Scholes and Anderson linked up brilliantly down the right before the Brazilian pulled the ball back for Rooney, who dragged his shot wide from 16 yards with only James to beat. United hope to finally bring their summer long pursuit of Tottenham striker Berbatov to a successful conclusion this week and could have done with some of the Bulgarian's guile and craft as they badly lacked any cutting edge in the second half.

Fletcher, who also netted against Newcastle last weekend, came closest to adding to the scoreline in the 70th minute when his fierce right foot volley was charged down by Glen Johnson after the impressive Anderson had danced his way through the home defence.

Portsmouth had beaten United in three of the pair's five Premier League meetings at Fratton Park but never looked likely to extend that proud record as their expensively-assembled front two of Crouch and Defoe were stifled by Rio Ferdinand and Vidic.



PHOTO: AFP

BACK ON TRACK: Manchester United midfielder Darren Fletcher screams with joy after scoring the all-important goal against Portsmouth during their Premier League match at Fratton Park on Sunday.

Real make Villa bid

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid have offered over 45 million euros (65 million dollars) for Valencia striker David Villa, the top scorer at Euro 2008 which was won by Spain, Spanish media reported Monday.

The amount which the club, which is looking for a possible

replacement for Brazilian striker Robinho who has said he wants to join Chelsea, are willing to pay for the 26-year-old varies between 47 and 48 million euros, the web sites of sports dailies Marca and AS reported.

Valencia has so far rejected the offer but a meeting between officials from both clubs and the player's agent has been scheduled for Tuesday, AS reported.

Real's German coach Bernd Schuster has insistently demanded

that the club recruit a striker if Robinho leaves the Spanish champions as he has said he would like to, Spanish media have reported.

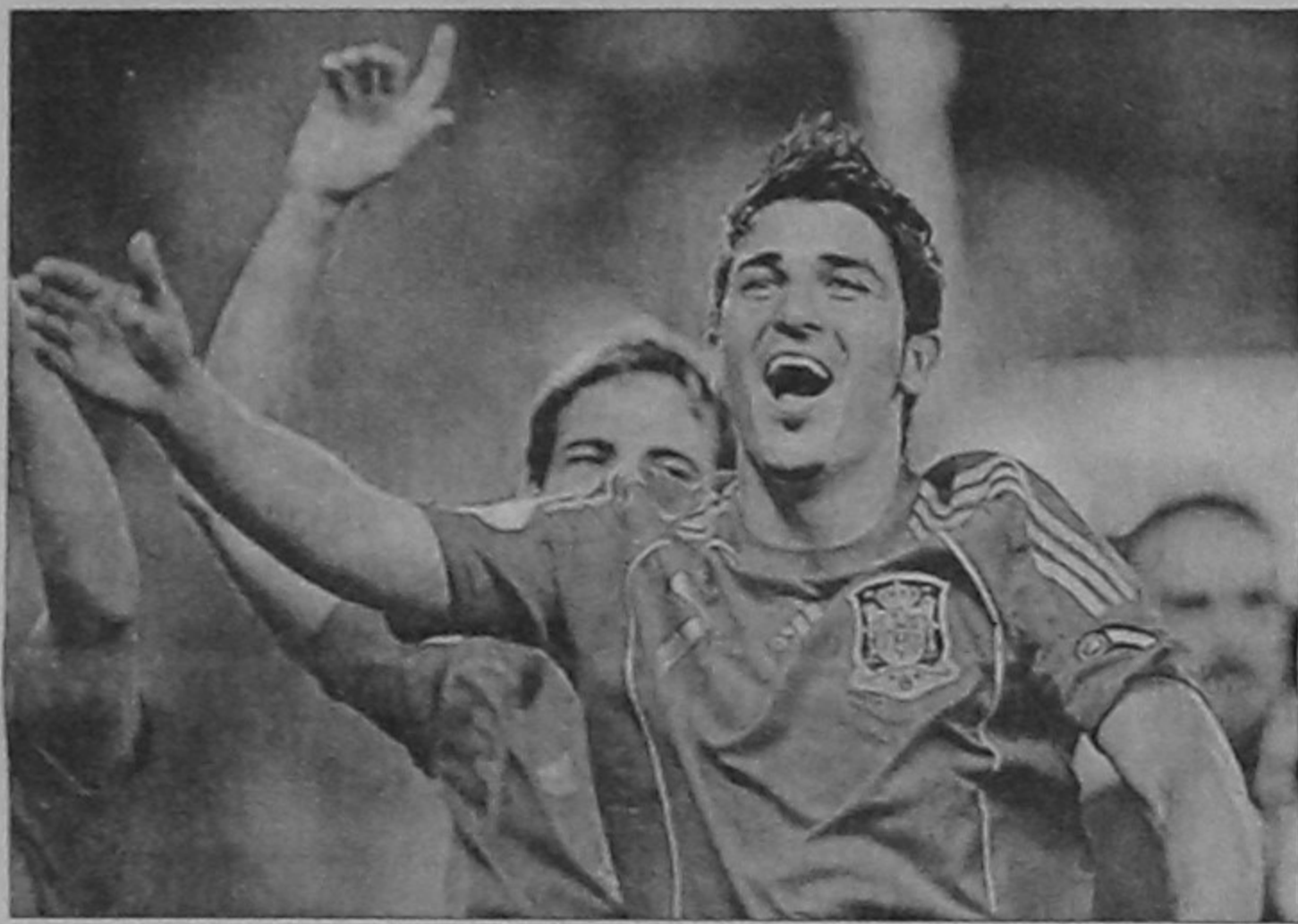
Among the other strikers who have been linked to a move to Real are Chelsea's Didier Drogba, Lyon's Karim Benzema and Ajax's Klas-Jan Huntelaar.

Real, which failed in its bid to lure Portuguese striker Cristiano Ronaldo from Manchester United, has not been very active in the European summer transfer period which ends at the end of the month and has the financial resources for a major deal.

Dutch international midfielder Rafael van der Vaart, who signed with Real for five years from German side Hamburg, has been the club's only new signing for the upcoming season.

Real signed Argentine defender Ezequiel Garay from Racing Santander at the end of the season but under the terms of the deal the player will only join the club in the 2009-10 season.

In addition, midfielders Javi Garcia and Ruben de la Red, who helped Spain win the Euro 2008 title in June, have rejoined Real after a season with Osasuna and Getafe respectively.



DAVID VILLA

Carragher warns L'pool

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Liverpool

Jamie Carragher has warned that Liverpool could pay the ultimate price for complacency if they underestimate Standard Liege in Wednesday's Champions League qualifier second-leg at Anfield.

Rafa Benitez's team, who lifted the European Cup for a fifth time by beating AC Milan in Istanbul in 2005, face a nervous return leg against the Belgian champions after failing to score in a tense 0-0 draw in the first leg two weeks ago.

If the second-leg ends as a scoring draw, Liverpool will be knocked out before the Champions League group stages and forced to look ahead instead to a UEFA Cup campaign.

But former England defender Carragher insists that Liverpool will not allow themselves to go into Wednesday's game with any thoughts of taking Liege lightly.

He said: "They are definitely the

toughest opponents we've had in a Champions League qualifier. I know people expect us to get through, but it's not as if we're playing a Mickey Mouse team."

"The Belgian league has a lot of quality and their champions are used to getting into the group stages. We had a tough match against Anderlecht a few years ago, so I'm not surprised Liege caused us problems."

"They caught us a bit cold in the first leg, but you have to remember that they had gone something like 30 games unbeaten in their own league and they are a club with European pedigree."

"We didn't play well and we know we'll have to improve at Anfield. Everyone knows how important it is for our season to get into the group stage."

"It's always a funny time for us to have such a massive game before we've got going in the season. Some of our results have reflected that."

"We lost at home to AK Graz in the year we won the competition and had a narrow win in the last

minute against Maccabi Haifa two years ago, so anyone thinking we'll win comfortably knows that's very dangerous."

Argentinian midfielder Javier Mascherano is unlikely to play for Liverpool, despite returning from the Beijing Olympics on Sunday.

But Irish forward Robbie Keane is expected to continue his fledgling strike partnership with Fernando Torres and the former Spurs player admits that he is determined to ensure that his Liverpool career ultimately delivers the trophies that he has struggled to amass at previous clubs.

Keane said: "I believe I'm at the top of my game right now and, like any player, I want to win things. I don't want to look back on my career and think I only won the Carling (League) Cup."

"I want to push on and win more and that's one of the reasons why I came to Liverpool. Another reason is the fact that I've always been a fan and if I could win something with this team, it would be a dream come true."

Spurs want Berbatov out

AFP, London

Tottenham will dump striker Dimitar Berbatov in the reserves if Manchester United do not come up with the 30million pounds (42 million euros) they want for the 27-year-old Bulgarian striker who has handed in a transfer request to try to force a move.

With the transfer window to close on September 1, United will have to look sharp if they are to make a move for the sharpshooter, whose unsettled stance led coach Juande Ramos to leave him on the bench for Saturday's defeat to Sunderland.

Ramos deemed him psychologically unfit to play and a threat to dressing-room harmony - and media reports in London on Monday said he faced being banished from the first team altogether.

Ramos and Berbatov held talks Sunday but the key to the outcome is whether United can come up with the cash to land their man.

Earlier this summer, Spurs had complained to the Premier League in the belief United had tapped up the forward.

With Robbie Keane having joined Liverpool, Spurs, who have lost their opening two league fixtures, would have only Darren Bent as an out-and-out striker should they offload Berbatov.

Radamel Falcao of Argentine side River Plate has been linked with a move to White Hart Lane, as has Wigan's veteran front man Emile Heskey.

Baros signs for Galatasaray

AFP, Istanbul

Czech international Milan Baros on Tuesday signed a three-year deal with Turkish champions Galatasaray, the club confirmed.

"All the signatures are on the contract, there is no problem," said senior club official Haldun Ustunel, adding that the striker would arrive in Istanbul on Thursday.

The 27-year-old, who was the top scorer in Euro 2004, was loaned in January by French champions Lyon to English side Portsmouth.

Baros, who scored seven goals in 30 games for Lyon, has not featured in Lyon coach Claude Puel's plans since the beginning of the season.

He previously played for English club Aston Villa as well as Liverpool from 2001 to 2006 after starting his career at Czech outfit Banik Ostrava.

Rivaldo set to exit Greece

AFP, Athens

Brazilian superstar Rivaldo told a Greek radio station Monday that he is leaving AEK Athens and will be playing this season for a club in Uzbekistan.

The 36-year-old midfielder said in an exclusive interview with Athenian radio station NovaSport FM that he talked with AEK officials and that they gave the okay for Rivaldo to join Bunyodkor, even though the Brazilian star had one more season on his two-year contract with the Greek team.

"I ask forgiveness from AEK supporters, but you can't say no to such a proposal," Rivaldo told the radio station.

"It has been a tough day. I had to make a very difficult decision. Something very positive has come up late in my career and I cannot turn it down."

Stars fighting jet lag

US OPEN

AP, New York

The rings of the Olympics are not the only ones in common for Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer and the Williams sisters.

Chances are those tennis champions also share dark circles under their eyes, courtesy of the just completed Beijing Games and cross-continent flying.

Fresh off a gold medal in men's singles at the Olympics, Nadal began his quest for his first U.S. Open title on Monday as the newly minted No. 1 player in the world.

"It's important, jet lag," this year's French Open and Wimbledon champion said Monday after an unexpectedly tight 7-6 (4), 6-3, 7-6 (4) victory over Bjorn Phau. "The rest is fine. The problem is to play Toronto, Cincinnati, Beijing and come back here. So in two weeks, two times, 12 hours' jet lag. Before, after Wimbledon, I only had six or seven days to recover."

"But at the same time, I must be very happy how I did this year anyway. If I lose tomorrow -- hopefully not -- I am happy about how I played this year. I am just trying to continue playing like this in this tournament."

If he does, maybe he can solve Federer on a hardcourt the way he finally figured out his rival on

Wimbledon grass last month. Nadal is seeking his third straight Grand Slam title, though he's never gotten past the U.S. Open quarterfinals.

Federer flamed out in singles in Beijing, but captured gold for Switzerland in doubles before heading to New York to try to defend his U.S. Open title for a fourth straight year.

There is no time to sleep at all, let alone on the hot Nadal, who just ended Federer's reign as the world's top player after an incredible 237 weeks.

The extensive travel and time zone jumping has been tough, but Federer has been gearing up for it. The Olympic tournament ended last Sunday, giving even the finalists a week to get to New York and become acclimated with Eastern Daylight Time.

Of the 64 men who played singles in Beijing, 51 are also in the U.S. Open field. Likewise, 55 women are doing the double that comes along every four years.

"I'm just going to try to recover from a whole lot of travelling we've had," said Federer, a 12-time Grand Slam champion. "You do a lot of prevention, you know, stretching, massage and a lot of sleep, eat healthy kind of thing."

While Nadal had his first match Monday afternoon, Federer and Olympic women's doubles champions Venus and Serena Williams weren't scheduled to begin their U.S. Open singles play until

Tuesday. Federer and Venus are the headliners under the lights Tuesday night, but Serena is slated for the afternoon session.

"Well, I'm still trying to get over the jet lag," Serena said. "Venus seems like she isn't having a problem, but I don't handle jet lag as well as she does. Hopefully it won't be an issue."

Venus did, however, lose track of the days as she prepared to shoot for her third U.S. Open title.

"We got here Thursday. I really don't know what day it is anymore," she said Saturday. "I thought today was Friday, but I'm here at the right time."

Elena Dementieva, the Open's No. 5 seed and the gold medal winner in women's singles in Beijing, was first on Arthur Ashe Stadium court just after 11 a.m. Monday and eliminated Akgul Amanmuradova 6-4, 7-5 in about 90 minutes.

Dementieva stopped home in Moscow following her Olympic win over countrywoman Dinara Safina on Sunday. After showing off her medal and celebrating with her family for one day -- including a visit to her tennis club -- Dementieva was back on the move. She arrived in New York on Wednesday.

"Yesterday, I was trying to go to sleep, but I mean I couldn't because I was watching the closing ceremony," Dementieva said Monday. "You know, my mind is

still there. I was trying to stay focused as possible as I could, and the court was not easy. I think the first round is never easy."

Andy Roddick is feeling better after dealing with an injury to his right shoulder that has limited him since his loss to Janko Tipsarevic in the second round at Wimbledon on June 26.

Roddick, the 2003 U.S. Open champion, sat out the French Open because of the injury and decided to bypass Beijing to work on his hardcourt game and avoid any problems the travel could present.

Whether he gained an advantage by playing in North America remains to be seen.

"I don't know. There's a week in between," he said. "For my sake, being able to get two tournaments, getting matches in, and at least playing my way into shape a little bit after the injuries, was probably a good move as far as my tennis goes."

Dementieva also wasn't sure if the added matches would be a plus or minus heading into the year's final Grand Slam tournament.

It didn't matter, anyway. Winning Olympic gold was her biggest goal.

"I don't know what is the best, to be a little tired but very comfortable and very positive or just to be fresh and not to play in the Olympic Games," the 26-year-old Russian said. "It's just another challenge, and we'll see if I can handle it."

40 years of Open era celebrated

US OPEN

AP, New York

As busy as Chris Evert's summer has been, she still found her way back to Flushing Meadows as the Grand Slam celebrated 40 years of the Open era on Monday night.

Evert, a six-time U.S. Open champion, returned for the gala event at Arthur Ashe Stadium just two months after marrying star golfer Greg Norman.

Even though she has three boys starting school this week, Evert wasn't about to miss a regal night like this.

"I have a lot going on, but whenever I'm called on ... whenever the USTA or whether it's Wimbledon or any of the Grand Slams call and they're having all the past champions get together to celebrate and have a parade or whatever, I just love doing things like this," said Evert, who won four straight U.S. Open titles from 1975-78.

The tournament changed forever back in 1968 when it opened up to allow professional players to enter the draw.

"It's part of my past that I want to still have it be part of my future, too," Evert said on the red carpet outside the stadium named for the late Ashe, the first men's champion of the Open era. I don't want to just erase the past and say that was then and this is now and now I'm a mom and now I'm doing other things."

Virginia Wade, the women's champion in 1968, always found New York to be a bit of comfort zone. That ability to relax helped her win the title.

"It was the joy of it," she said Monday night. "I didn't have the pressure of playing at Wimbledon as an English player. I could come here and get on with it."

Lindsay Davenport began her U.S. Open career way back in 1991 when she was just 15 and feeling very overmatched.

Now at 32 she is back for her

17th appearance in the main draw at Flushing Meadows. Instead of being a kid, she is the mother of one -- 1-year-old Jagger Jonathan.

"I started out here," she said Monday after a 6-4, 6-2 victory over Aleksandra Wozniak in the first round. "The first year I got a wild card into the main draw and I had played juniors before thinking that I was out of league and that I was

just so fortunate to be able to walk on the grounds."

That soon changed. Davenport was a U.S. Open semifinalist in 1997 and the tournament winner a year later -- eventually reaching No. 1 in the world.

"Becoming a champion of it and then becoming a player with really good results, and now coming back as a mom and as a former No. 1 and

the champion, I mean it's just all overwhelming," Davenport said.

She missed last year's tournament after her son was born in June, the first American championship she sat out since making her debut. An injury to her right knee that forced her to withdraw from Wimbledon this summer also threatened to slow her for the rest of the season.

That pain is gone, and now she could be ready to make another run.

"I thought I played pretty well, considering I haven't really played since April and had been injured," she said. "I knew I drew a tough opponent in the first round, so I'm happy to have played the way I did and get through in the scoreline in the fashion I did."

Other than rest and some therapy, Davenport said she doesn't know what was the secret formula to getting her knee healthy again.

"All of a sudden, just right before the Olympics it seemed to turn a corner," she said. "I have no idea what happened, but it feels better now."

Andy Murray comes into the Open with his highest ranking ever at No. 6. The 21-year-old Brit said his attitude on the court changed after he committed to getting into better shape.

"Now that I've started to work really hard off the court, you go into the matches with sort of no excuses, no worries," he said after beating Sergio Roitman of Argentina 6-3, 6-4, 6-0 in the first round Monday.

Murray spent about a month in Florida training around the beginning of the year. He'd go to the gym twice a day and practice in steamy conditions. He also now travels with a trainer.

"It's a complete waste of time going on the court and finding reasons why you might lose the match and what have you -- you just go out there and fight for every single point, because that's a complete waste of time putting the work in if you're not going to use it out on the court," Murray said.

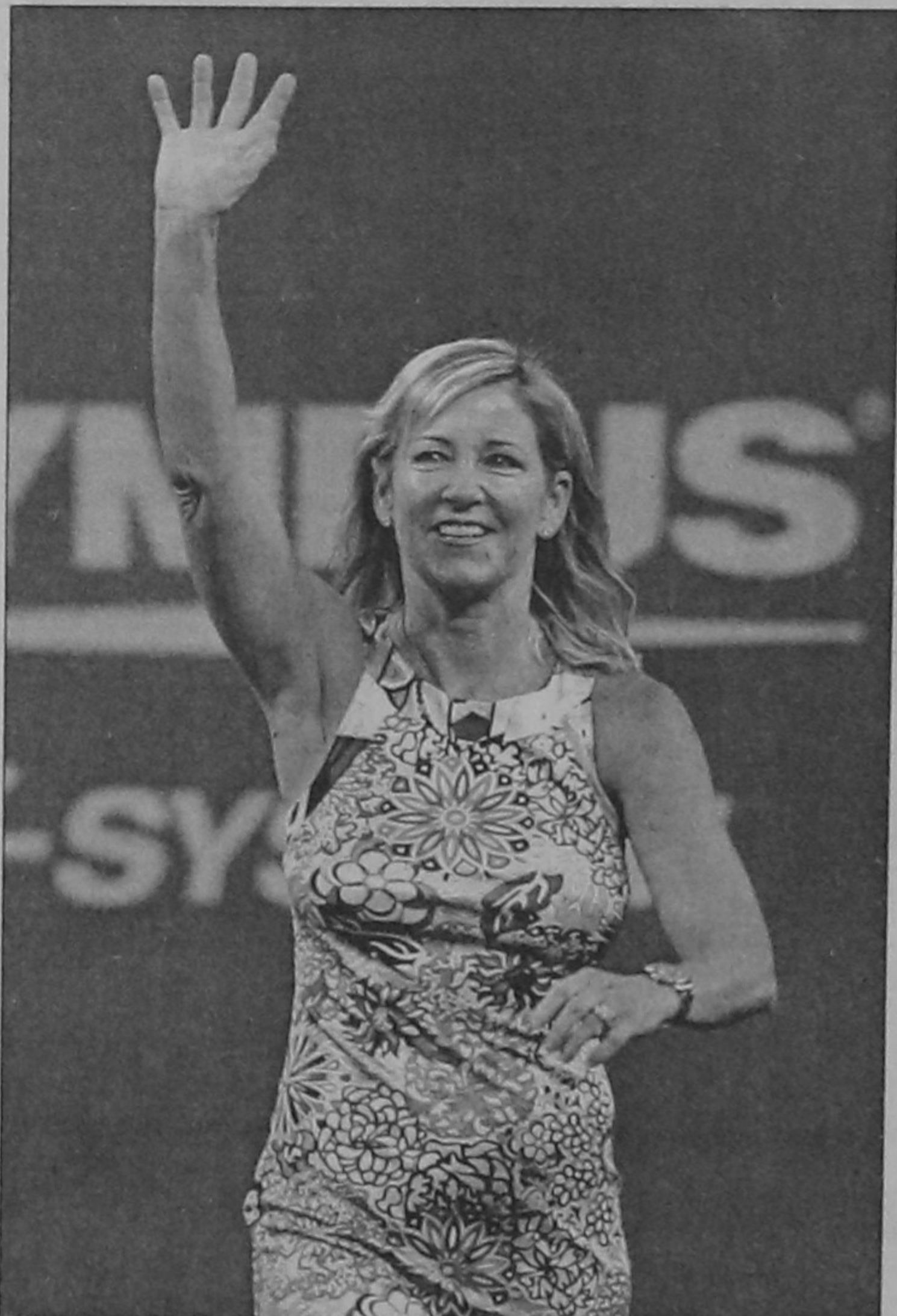


PHOTO: AFP

Former US Open Champion Chris Evert waves to the crowd as she walks on the court during opening ceremonies of the 2008 US Open at Flushing Meadows on Monday.

Sheva seals Milan move

AFP, Rome



Ukraine forward Andrei Shevchenko completed his move to AC Milan on Monday after passing a medical and his arrival is set to spark some last ditched transfer activity in the country.

According to Tuesday's press the big four are all going to bring in players before the transfer window closes at the end of the month.

Both major daily sports newspapers Gazzetta dello Sport and Corriere dello Sport claim that Milan will add Arsenal defender Philippe Senderos to their roster this week.

Gazzetta says the Italians will pay 2 million euros (2.9 million dollars) to take the big Swiss centre-back on loan for one season with an option to buy him in a year's time for 8 million euros.

It says Senderos was due in

Milan on Tuesday to undergo a medical.

Gazzetta also claims Porto winger Ricardo Quaresma's on-off transfer to Inter Milan is 80 per cent certain to go through during the next 48 hours.

Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho admitted following his side's Supercup victory over AS Roma at the weekend that he wanted to bring in his 24-year-old countryman.

Gazzetta also claims Juventus are 80 per cent sure to bring back Ghana midfielder Stephen Appiah from Turkish team Fenerbahce.

Appiah spent two seasons at Juve from 2003-05 before leaving for Turkey.

But Gazzetta notes that his arrival could be jeopardised by the foreigner ruling in Italy limiting the number of non-European Union players allowed in the match-day squad.

It also says players would need to be shipped out before he can arrive with Portuguese midfielder

Tiago, who has rejected a move to Everton, possibly heading to Porto or Atletico Madrid.

Corriere dello Sport, meanwhile, claims Roma will sign one of Chelsea's Florent Malouda, Inter's David Suazo and Monaco's Jeremy Menez before the window closes.

Honduran Suazo is likely to struggle to break into Mourinho's Inter while Malouda has found himself on the bench in both of Chelsea's first two Premier League games this season.

With Chelsea also chasing the signature of Real Madrid's Robinho, he is likely to find a first XI berth even harder to come by.

Menez is rumoured to be Roma's preferred option but with Monaco reportedly looking for 25 million euros, Roma could be priced out of that deal.

Corriere also says Roma's city neighbours Lazio are trying to tie up a deal for Milan's Cristian Brocchi and Inter's Hernan Crespo.