



Aston Villa's new signing Emile Heskey holds up his team shirt in Birmingham on Friday.

Hull sign Bullard

AFP, London

Hull have bolstered their squad by signing midfielder Jimmy Bullard from Fulham for a club record fee of five million pounds.

The 30-year-old signed a four-and-a-half-year contract at the KC Stadium on Friday after passing a medical and agreeing personal terms.

Bullard was expected to be presented to Hull supporters before the FA Cup fourth-round clash against Millwall on Saturday but will not play in that match.

Fulham boss Roy Hodgson said the west London club had no option but to sell Bullard in light of his demand for an extended contract on substantially increased wages.

"It's too easy for fans to say the club should have done more to keep Jimmy," Hodgson said. "People at the top of the club have to look at the wider picture every time there are wage demands or new contract demands."

"I was rather hoping there wouldn't be anyone else out there who would give Jimmy the package he was looking for but Hull came up with it. Now we have to prove we can be a good team without him."

Bullard joined Fulham from Wigan in a 2.5-million-pound deal in 2006 but suffered a serious knee injury in only his fourth match for the club.

He came back from a 16-month lay off and his all-action displays earned him an England call-up at the start of this season.

Frey wants to top Buffon

AFP, Rome

French goalkeeper Sebastien Frey said he is fed up with playing second fiddle to Italy's number one stopper Gianluigi Buffon in an interview published in the Gazzetta dello Sport on Saturday.

Frey is regarded as one of the best goalkeepers in Serie A but once again Buffon scooped the top goalkeeper award for 2008 in the Italian football Oscars, something which is starting to rile Frey who was once again named in the top three, alongside Inter's Julio Cesar.

"I'm not too pleased that once again we finished in this order (Frey was second)," he said.

"I've been in the top three for the last seven years but I've never won."

It is not just in Serie A that Frey is a perpetual bridesmaid, he has also had to get used to that role in the France squad, winning just two caps.

But he is still dreaming on all fronts.

"I want to win in purple (Fiorentina's colours), I want to lift as many trophies as possible," he said.

That's the one thing I envy of Gigi (Buffon), his incredible trophy cabinet.

"My dream is the World Cup in South Africa, a final between France and Italy with everything decided on a penalty shoot-out and I save one more than Gigi."

That would be the perfect scenario but right now the national team is a dream, things are a bit foggy.

That's not so clear because back in August the 28-year-old announced his international retirement to concentrate on his club career, although that only came after a snub from France coach Raymond Domenech for a friendly against Sweden.

Heskey moves to Villa

AFP, London



Wigan on Friday sold Emile Heskey to Aston Villa for 3.5 million pounds and immediately snapped up Egypt striker Mido on loan from Middlesbrough as cover until the end of the season.

England forward Heskey's move to Villa was completed after he passed a medical and agreed personal terms while Mido was being lined up to form an Egyptian double act with compatriot Amr Zaki.

Heskey's move will reunite him with Villa boss Martin O'Neill, who was in charge of Leicester when they sold the forward to Liverpool for 11 million pounds in 2000.

Heskey, 31, has signed a three-and-a-half-year contract and O'Neill believes he will strengthen the club's drive for a place in the

Champions League.

"I hope we can achieve a lot together. Aston Villa is a big club and it's been taking strides to get back to where it should be," said Heskey.

"The prospect of working with Martin again was one of the biggest factors for me. I have very fond memories of playing for him. I played for four seasons with him at Leicester."

"We were always finishing in the top half of the Premier League table and he took us to three League Cup finals in four years and into Europe."

O'Neill said: "We are in a decent position at the moment. We need to keep the momentum going. We don't have the biggest squad in the world, and currently John Carew is out and Ashley Young is suspended."

"Emile will bring something to us. Gabriel Agbonlahor has done fantastic up front on his own, and Emile will give us another option."

O'Neill confirmed that he is also hoping to sign a centreback before the transfer window closes at the start of next month.

That has become a greater priority after captain Martin Laursen was ruled out for two months following knee surgery.

Wigan boss Steve Bruce, who has now lost two of his best players after the sale of Wilson Palacios to Spurs, said he was confident Mido could plug the gap left by Heskey.

"Mido brings vast experience to the table," Bruce said. "He has a good Premier League pedigree having scored goals at Tottenham and Middlesbrough, and he has also played for some huge European clubs where he gained Champions League and UEFA Cup experience."

"He is still a relatively young man with potentially his best years ahead of him and hopefully he can produce a bit of magic for us during the rest of the season."

Benitez eyes revenge

AFP, Liverpool



Rafael Benitez expects Liverpool to shrug off the dual distractions of takeover talk and Steven Gerrard's court appearance by gaining revenge over Everton in the FA Cup on Sunday.

After plotting a serene course through the first half of the season, Benitez has endured a turbulent period that threatens to blow his plans for domestic and European glory to pieces.

Benitez's astonishing rant at Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson earlier this month hinted that the Liverpool manager was starting to feel the strain of challenging for the title.

The Spaniard followed that outburst by admitting he had rejected Liverpool's offer of a new contract.

Then George Gillett and Tom Hicks, the Premier League side's American owners, made it clear they are ready to start a potentially

distracting auction after the Kuwait-based Al-Kharafi family reportedly expressed interest in launching a 500 million pounds takeover.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Gerrard's alleged involvement in a nightclub brawl resulted in a high profile court appearance on Friday at which the Liverpool captain pleaded not guilty to charges of assault and affray.

Although Benitez says otherwise, it is surely no coincidence that Liverpool's results have suffered in recent weeks.

The frustration of a draw at Stoke followed Tim Cahill's late equaliser for Everton in last Monday's Merseyside derby has left Liverpool licking their wounds behind new Premier League leaders United.

But at the end of another emotionally draining week, Liverpool have a chance to get back on track by beating their local rivals at Anfield.

"We are in a very good position in all the competitions and really focused on football. We know things can happen around the club. But

at the end we have to come to work, to train and to be ready for the next game," Benitez said.

Gerrard trained on Friday after his court date and is expected to play some part in the first FA Cup Merseyside derby for 18 years.

Benitez will still make several changes however as he rests players ahead of Wednesday's league trip to Wigan and goalkeeper Diego Cavalieri could start along with Andrea Dossena, Ryan Babel, Yossi Benayoun and Lucas.

"Steven is in the right frame of mind. He scored a few goals in five-a-side and he is very positive and okay for the match," Benitez said.

"We were disappointed not to win against Everton on Monday; we were leading until the final minutes and we must not allow ourselves to make the sort of mistakes we made in those last minutes."

"We feel we have the quality to win this second match with Everton. We want to get to the final again - the experience we had winning the Cup in 2006 was wonderful."

Anelka fancies English

AFP, Rome



Chelsea's French forward Nicolas Anelka confidently claimed the three English teams facing Italian opposition in the Champions League second round will record a clean sweep.

Anelka made his undiplomatic prediction in an interview with Italian sports newspaper La Gazzetta dello Sport.

His Chelsea team face Juventus, reigning champions Manchester United take on Inter Milan while Arsenal were drawn against AS Roma.

"If I had to make a bet I'd say 3-0 to the English. Chelsea, Manchester and Arsenal progressing ahead of Juve, Inter and Roma," he said. "Watch what happens but anything can happen."

Anelka is particularly looking forward to coming up against Juve's David Trezeguet, who came through

the French junior system at the same time as the man known as 'the Incredible Hulk'.

"It's a huge match, Juve are top drawer," he said. "It's always tough against Italian teams, tactically they're the best in Europe. If we don't break them down, if we don't score, it will be very risky for us."

"We have to score in the first leg (at home) and not concede in order to have a chance in Turin."

Trezeguet, who has played only eight minutes this season due to injury, should be available for the clash.

"That's terrible news for us. I admire David, there aren't many goalscorers like him around. He was born to score goals. 'Juve are as good as Inter. (Alessandro) Del Piero is an incredible talent. (Pavel) Nedved, (Gianluigi) Buffon, everyone. We'll have to be at our best to beat Juve."

Anelka has played for eight different teams in four different countries during his career but never in Italy, and that despite being married to Italian singer Barbara Tausia.

However, the 29-year-old, whose family hails from the island of Martinique, revealed he came close a couple of times.

"My wife and her family are from Italy. I met her in Paris, she was on TV with her eurodance group Eu4ya," he said.

"She sings and dances beautifully and she's an even better cook, Italian of course."

"But I don't yet know Italy. (Sven Goran) Eriksson wanted me at Lazio when Arsenal sold me to Real Madrid and I could have gone to Juventus if (Didier) Deschamps had stayed."

Anelka has had a potted career, winning the double in England with Arsenal, the Champions League with Real Madrid and the Turkish title with Fenerbahce.

He also won the European Championships with France in 2000, when they beat Italy in the final, but was not part of the squad that won the World Cup on home soil in 1998, nor three years ago when they lost to Italy in the final in Germany.

Chelsea won't sell Drogba to City

AFP, London

Chelsea assistant coach Ray Wilkins on Friday attempted to quash speculation that Didier Drogba could be sold to cash-rich Manchester City before the end of the January transfer window.

Drogba has been left out of Chelsea's squad for their last two matches but returns for an FA Cup fourth-round tie against Ipswich at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

Reports of a bust-up with head coach Luiz Felipe Scolari have helped to fuel a belief that Drogba could be used as a makeweight in a deal to bring City's unsettled Brazilian star Robinho to west London.

But Scolari's number two, Wilkins, insisted there had been no contact between the two clubs. "We haven't received anything from Manchester City," said the former England midfielder.

"Of course every player in world football has his price but he's a massive part of our squad. He won't be going anywhere in the transfer window."

Wilkins said Drogba, who has admitted to harbouring an ambition to play in Italy and/or Spain before the end of his career, had been working hard in training since an abject performance in Chelsea's 3-0 defeat at Manchester United earlier in the month.

"Every player has little dips and it's about how you react," Wilkins said.

"He's reacted in positive fashion and we're delighted to have him here. He is a big asset."

Wilkins also reiterated that Chelsea had no plans to buy any new players in this transfer window.

Kalle foresees ownership changes

INTERNET, undated

Europe's football landscape will see big changes due to the world economic crisis, top officials of German Bundesliga champions Bayern Munich said. Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge told Saturday's edition of the Sueddeutsche Zeitung that "several clubs (in Europe) appear to face bankruptcy."

"I hear that there are not only massive problems in England, but also in Spain and Italy - not so much among the top clubs but on the next level," Rummenigge said.

General manager Uli Hoeness, in an interview with Der Spiegel magazine made available ahead of Monday's publication, said that "club ownership will change considerably" within the next six months.

Takeover speculation includes clubs such as top English sides Chelsea and Liverpool.

Rummenigge and Hoeness said that the Bundesliga in general and Munich in particular will likely be able to ride out the economic storm due to stricter licensing rules.

"Compared to other leagues it (the Bundesliga) is well financed," said Hoeness.

Rummenigge said: "Right now I foresee no financial crisis for Munich. But in these turbulent times no one can predict what happens the day after tomorrow."

Angry Saviola wants out

SOCCERNET

Javier Saviola wants Real Madrid to decide whether to play him or let him leave, the Argentina striker said on Saturday.

"It's a difficult situation. You have to be very strong mentally because as each game goes by without playing you are destroyed a little more psychologically," the 27-year-old told sports daily Marca.

"I spoke to (coach) Juande (Ramos) to find out where I stood. I told him I needed to play and if I wasn't in his plans to notify the management to allow me to go during the January transfer window because this situation is intolerable."

Saviola left arch-rivals Barcelona in 2007 after falling out of favour with then-coach Frank Rijkaard.

Hughes has full control

Football

AFP, London

Indiscipline is not a problem at Manchester City, according to manager Mark Hughes, who has insisted that he has the backing of the club's billionaire owner Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan to enforce his own code of behaviour.

City's record signing Robinho courted unwelcome controversy this week when he left the club's warm-weather training camp in Tenerife, without permission, to return home to Brazil.

Hughes has since revealed he will deal with the matter internally, but the timing of Robinho's disappearing act served to further undermine City in a week when AC Milan midfielder Kaka snubbed their lucrative offer to move to Eastlands.

Despite that Hughes remains convinced the club's lofty ambitions remain on track and warned that should players step out of line in that quest, he will have the backing of Sheikh Mansour to dish out whatever punishment he deems necessary.

"I will deal with Robinho in such a way that I absolutely would not expect this to happen again and I feel confident that if there was a

longer problem with any player, even Robinho, I would have the go-ahead from Sheikh Mansour to deal with it in whatever way I saw fit," Hughes told the Daily Mail.

Hughes was also keen to dismiss speculation that Robinho's decision to return to his homeland suggested he was already looking for a way out of Eastlands, less than six months after signing for 32.5 million pounds.

Hughes said he was sick of talk he needed to convince Robinho of the club's ambitions, especially after a below-par start to the current campaign which finds them in the bottom half of the Barclays Premier League table.

"People talk about assurances to Robinho, but any reassurances would just be repetition. He knows how I feel," he added.

"I have always felt that the top players are easier to control because they have a professional mentality and a winning mentality and that is why they are at the top."

"Now it seems a bit bizarre to be talking like this considering what has happened with Robinho, but it will be addressed, mainly because I expect certain standards from my best guys."

"I have no problem with good footballers."

"The ones that are a problem are those ones that have a higher opinion of their ability than is apparent and a higher opinion of their worth to the team."

Australian Open SECRETS

INTERNET, undated

It will be anything but French cuisine for Fabrice Santoro after the legendary veteran played his final match at the Australian Open, going down to Andy Roddick in the third round.

Santoro, 36 and due to retire later this year, was surprised with an on-court ceremony to mark his long run at Melbourne Park, where he first played in 1991 as a teenager. Along with the verbal accolades from Tennis Australia and his opponent, Santoro also received a voucher good for a meal with his team anywhere in Melbourne.

Now the Swiss-based bon vivant is looking for dining suggestions Down Under. "Can you help me," he said to a questioner in his post-match media.

"Not French, I have plenty of time for a French restaurant. But find a good place, I have to celebrate."

The man they call the Magician for his unique two-fisted attack off both forehand and backhand wings said he was moved by the presentation ceremony.

"I was not expecting at all the ceremony on the court, it was something very emotional for me," he said. "We are so far from France at one of the biggest tournaments in the world."

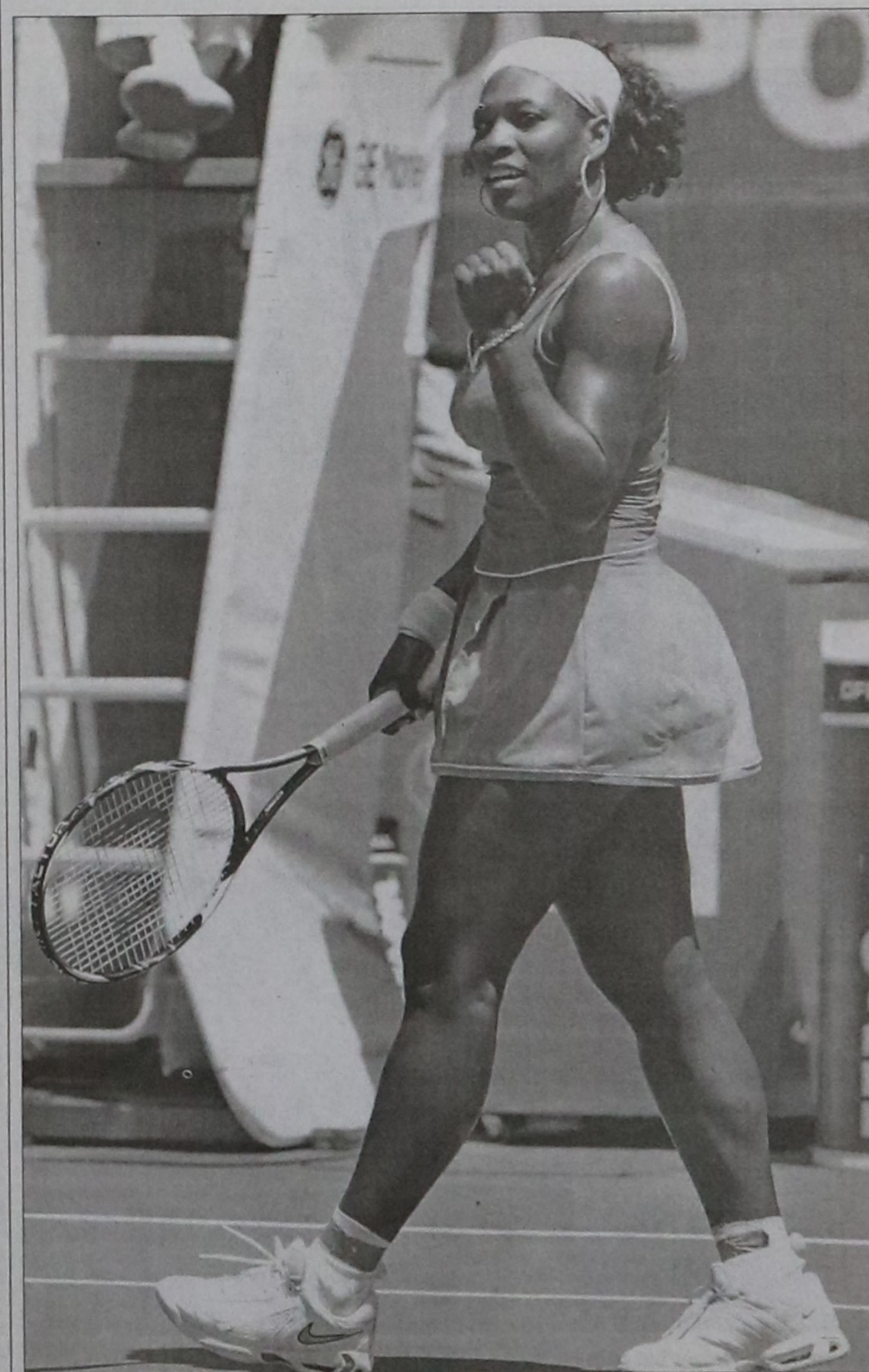
"Being on the court with a microphone and talking to the crowd, probably live TV in France, I was not ready for that."

FRUSTRATED HEWITT

Melbourne - High-profile Lleyton Hewitt heads a shame list of players who have copped fines for bad behavior during the first week of the Australian Open.

The former number one was forced to pay 1,500 dollars for verbal abuse during his disheartening first-round loss to Fernando Gonzalez.

Aussie young gun Brydan Klein followed in Hewitt's footsteps as he drew a 1,000-dollar sanction for an audible obscenity as he went



US star Serena Williams celebrates her victory over Peng Shuai of China at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Saturday. Williams won 6-1, 6-4.