

Arshavin deal almost done

AFP, Liverpool  
Arsene Wenger believes that Arsenal are on the verge of finally sealing a deal to sign Andrei Arshavin from Zenit St Petersburg.

The Gunners' pursuit of the Russia playmaker, who is valued at around 15 million pounds, has been one of the most protracted deals of the current transfer window.

Arshavin's Russian club have claimed that a fee has been agreed and although Wenger remains cautious, he admitted following the 1-1 draw at Everton on Wednesday that he is on the verge of making his first signing of the month.

"I have been focused on the Everton game and didn't pick up any phone-calls so nothing has happened," he said.

"It is 90 per cent (finished) and I don't know what happened today (Wednesday). In this kind of job sometimes the 10 per cent is more important than the 90 per cent because people can change their minds quickly."

Bayer, Werder through

AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen, Werder Bremen and Wolfsburg booked their places in the quarterfinals of the German Cup on Wednesday, while second-tier Wehen Wiesbaden sprung a surprise with a 1-0 win at first-division Karlsruhe.

They join Hamburg, Schalke 04, second-division Mainz and reigning cup-holders Bayern Munich in the last eight, which will feature six of the current top 10 from the country's top division.

First-half goals from Patrick Helmes, Michal Kadlec and Renato Augusto secured Leverkusen a 3-1 win at home to Energie Cottbus, while second-half strikes by Hugo Almeida and Claudio Pizarro gave Werder Bremen a 2-1 comeback victory at Borussia Dortmund.

A second-half effort from forward Ronny Konig earned second-tier Wehen an unexpected 1-0 win over Bundesliga strugglers Karlsruhe, while Wolfsburg crushed Hansa Rostock 5-1.

Bayern showed few signs of rustiness as they roared to a thumping 5-1 win at Stuttgart on Tuesday, in their first fixture since the German winter break began at the end of December.

A fine opener from Bastian Schweinsteiger set them on their way, with Franck Ribery, Luca Toni, Ze Roberto and another Schweinsteiger strike establishing a crushing margin of victory.

France midfielder Ribery was even able to chip a soft 21st-minute penalty straight into the arms of Stuttgart goalkeeper Jens Lehmann after Arthur Boka had been penalised for hand-ball.

German international Mario Gomez tapped in a late consolation for the home side.

Elsewhere on Tuesday, a hat-trick from Croatian striker Ivica Olić gave Hamburg a 3-1 win at home to second-division 1860 Munich, while Schalke 04 saw off third-tier Carl Zeiss Jena by four goals to one.

Serena, Safina in final

Australian Open

AFP, Melbourne

Serena Williams will gun for her 10th Grand Slam title and the world number one ranking against Dinara Safina in the Australian Open final after they both came through tough clashes on Thursday.

With the roof of the Rod Laver Arena closed as temperatures soared to a sweltering 44.3 C (111.7 F), Williams is hitting form at the right time as she ended Elena Dementieva's 15-match winning streak 6-3, 6-4.

The American second seed, who has won the title here three times, threw off the service problems that have dogged her throughout the tournament for a convincing victory to set up a Safina showdown.

Third-seeded Safina lost her only Grand Slam final at last year's French Open but looks capable of making the breakthrough after battling past fellow Russian and sev-

enth seed Vera Zvonareva 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

Adding spice to Saturday's decider is the chance to claim the world's top ranking, with the winner dethroning Jelena Jankovic who crashed out in the fourth round.

The odds were against Williams with Dementieva on a hot win streak this year, but the American blasted 10 aces as the Russian's service game fell apart.

"It means a lot, I have to go one more and obviously I want to win," said Williams, 28.

"I'm excited that I'm playing really consistent, you know, consistently at least making it to the finals of Grand Slams. So that's exciting, too."

It was heartbreaking for Dementieva, who was eliminated in a Grand Slam semifinal for the third straight time as her elusive maiden Major title again slipped from her grasp.

"Well, I just had a good run, you know, from the beginning of the year," said the 27-year-old, who has now failed to make a Grand Slam final in 41 attempts.

"I played a lot of matches, I won all of them. And I feel like today I was not quick enough. I was maybe not aggressive enough against her."

"But I have no regrets. I had just a great time here."

Meanwhile an incredibly focused Safina was too steady for Zvonareva as she powered to the straight-sets win, giving herself the chance to emulate older brother Marat by winning the Australian Open.

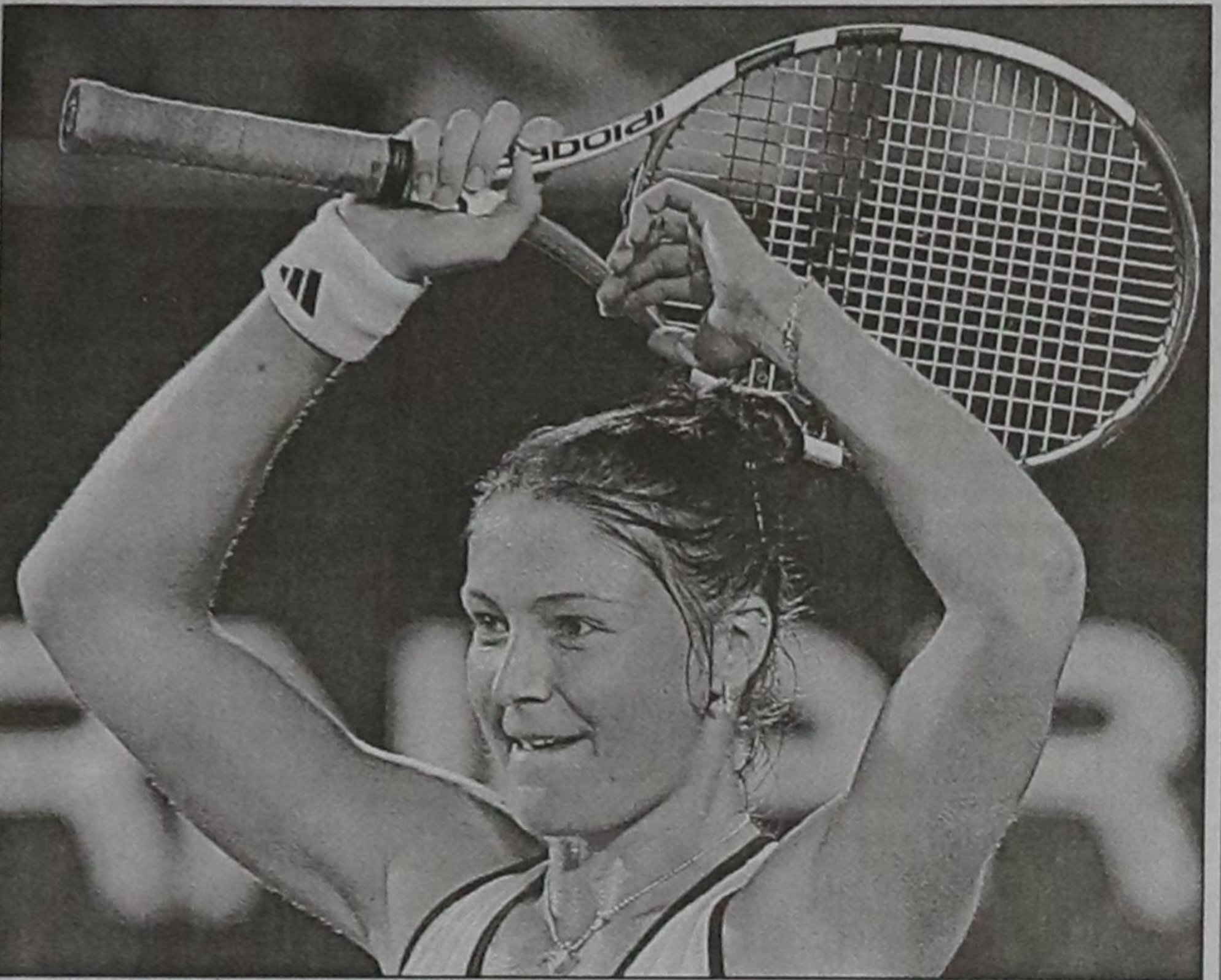
"I remember watching my brother on TV winning this tournament, and if I still watched it today I would have tears in my eyes," she said.

"It's great that I can follow in his footsteps. He was my idol -- he still is my idol -- and the fact that I'm doing as well as him is amazing."

The chance to claim the number one ranking is another major motivator for the 22-year-old from Moscow.

"Since I was growing up my dream was to be the number one in the world," Safina added.

"To play Serena in the final for the number one is unbelievable."



Dinara Safina of Russia celebrates her semifinal victory against compatriot Vera Zvonareva at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Thursday.

Liverpool lose ground

AFP, London

Liverpool's bid for a first English title since 1990 suffered a significant setback on Wednesday as Rafael Benitez's side were held to a 1-1 draw at Wigan.

A late penalty equaliser from Egyptian striker Mido earned Wigan a deserved point and enabled Chelsea, 2-0 winners over Middlesbrough, to reclaim second place from Liverpool, courtesy of their superior goal difference.

Both clubs however will be acutely aware that the title is now Manchester United's to lose with the champions, who thrashed West Brom 5-0 on Tuesday, two points clear of both their nearest rivals with a game in hand.

Arsenal's chances of a return to the Champions League next season suffered another blow as they were held to a 1-1 draw at Everton.

It could have been worse for the Gunners but for Robin van Persie's stoppage time equaliser, which cancelled out Tim Cahill's opener for Everton.

The draw nevertheless left Arsenal five points adrift of Aston Villa, the side currently occupying the fourth and final qualifying spot for Europe's elite competition.

Yossi Benayoun put Liverpool ahead at Wigan four minutes before half-time. Wigan dominated after the break but Liverpool looked like they would hold out before Jason Koumas went down under an unnecessary challenge from Lucas Leiva.

Mido, signed on loan from Middlesbrough until the end of the season, stepped up and smashed the spot-kick past Jose Reina.

A double from Salomon Kalou gave Chelsea their win over Middlesbrough and set up what the Blues' assistant manager, Ray Wilkins, billed as a "massive game" at Liverpool on Sunday.

Blackburn came from two goals down to rescue a point against local rivals Bolton with Benni McCarthy making amends for a missed penalty by notching the equaliser.

Matt Taylor and Kevin Davies had put Bolton 2-0 ahead at the break. Stephen Warnock pulled a goal back in the 66th-minute and

McCarthy ultimately rescued a point despite having a penalty saved by Bolton goalkeeper Jussi Jaaskelainen.

Brazilian forward Robinho put off-field worries to one side to set up Shaun Wright-Phillips for Manchester City's opening goal in a 2-1 win over Newcastle.

Questioned by police on Tuesday over an alleged sexual assault, Robinho was named in the starting line-up and rewarded the faith of manager Mark Hughes with the pass that cued up Wright-Phillips to score after 17 minutes.

Newcastle's cause was not helped by the loss of Michael Owen, who limped off midway through the first half, and Craig Bellamy, making his debut for City against one of his former clubs, made sure of the three points with a left-foot drive 13 minutes from time.

Andy Carroll pulled a goal back for Newcastle but they never looked like salvaging a point.

West Ham extended their unbeaten run to seven matches by beating Hull 2-0 with goals either side of half-time from David Di Michele and Carlton Cole.

'Becks will return to Galaxy'

AFP, Los Angeles

Los Angeles Galaxy boss Tim Leiweke said he expects David Beckham to honour his commitment and return for another year of football in North America.

"David is under contract to the Galaxy and I have a good straight-forward conversation with him before he left and he loves it in LA," Leiweke told the Los Angeles Times.

"He wants a better Galaxy team. We are going to have a better Galaxy team and David has no interest in going."

The 33-year-old Beckham is currently on a three-month loan to AC Milan from the Galaxy. The stint expires in March but AC Milan is interested in keeping him.

"We have a contract, we have a handshake, his kids go to school here, end of story. There is no story. He is going to return to the Galaxy," Leiweke said.

Beckham sent shockwaves through the football world two years ago by signing a five-year deal with the Major League Soccer club that could be worth up to 250 million dollars.

Since then he has scored just five goals for the Galaxy who finished with the worst record in the league last season.

"This is a world class impact player and it's still a very good move for soccer here," Leiweke said. "And he is proving me right if you watch the goal he scored for Milan the other day."

Leiweke says you can't measure Beckham's success solely by what the team does on the field. You have to take into consideration what he does as an ambassador for the league.

"I look at attendance, teams coming into the league, TV ratings," Leiweke said.



Milan midfielder David Beckham (jersey number 32) hugs teammate Kaka after scoring the opening goal against Genoa during their Serie A football encounter at San Siro on Wednesday.

BECKHAM SCORES AGAIN Inter extend lead

AFP, Rome

Diego Milito equalised three minutes from time to deny David Beckham a winning goal as AC Milan were held to a 1-1 draw by Genoa at the San Siro on Wednesday.

Just three days after scoring his first goal for Milan, in the 4-1 win at Bologna, former England skipper Beckham netted his second from a freekick but it wasn't enough to guide the Italian giants to victory.

Milan coach Ancelotti was understandably disappointed after the game and gave short shrift to a question about Beckham staying.

"We haven't managed to win a match in which we played really well and which we deserved to win," he said.

It means that third placed Milan fell to eight points behind leaders Inter Milan as the champions won 2-0 at Catania in Sicily despite playing for an hour with 10 men.

Coach Jose Mourinho sat out a one-match ban in the stands but star striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic said the team weren't affected.

"Today the manager wasn't there but we were just as good with our boss in the stands and when he returns we'll be even better," he said.

Inter were off to a stunning start when Dejan Stankovic gave them the lead after just five minutes.

Julio Cruz escaped down the right, turned inside his marker and crossed with his left foot as the Serbian stormed into the box to glance home a header.

Catania thought they had equalised on 13 minutes when Michele Paolucci fired a loose ball past Julio Cesar but Japanese forward Takayuki Morimoto was harshly penalised for a high foot on Argentine centre-back Nicolas Burdisso who had stooped to almost waist height to meet a cross with his head.

However, any hard feelings Catania may have had for Paolucci's disallowed strike were eased as Ghana

midfielder Muntari Sulley was shown a straight red card for a foul on Giacomo Tedesco on 31 minutes.

Tedesco's foot got caught under Sulley's leg as he slid in for what looked to be no more than a booking but the referee stunned the Inter players by pulling out the red card.

20 minutes from time Ibrahimovic settled the affair for the champions as he beat the offside trap, latched onto Stankovic's long ball forward, chipped the stranded goalkeeper Albano Bizarri and collected the ball before slotting home.

Inter's lead now stands at six points after Juventus lost 2-1 at Udinese, who won for the first time in 12 matches.

Fabio Quagliarella gave Udinese the lead on 20 minutes after a lightning break involving Antonio Di Natale and Kwadwo Assamoah.

Di Natale added a second 16 minutes from time but three minutes later Vincenzo Iaquinta pulled a goal back from the penalty spot to set up a nervy finale.

Big guns falter

AFP, Melbourne

Pim Verbeek voiced confidence in his rookie Socceroos team despite a 0-0 draw with lowly Indonesia, as Asian Cup qualifying was overshadowed by an alleged mass brawl after Singapore beat Jordan.

Playing in Jakarta's imposing Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, Australia, fielding domestic A-League players instead of their foreign-based stars, found it hard going on a soft and bumpy pitch with few scoring chances on either side.

Indonesian striker Budi Sudarsano had the best opportunity from close range on 62 minutes, with Archie Thompson and Paul Reid going close for Australia.

Australia are third in the table with one point behind leaders Oman who have four. Second-placed Indonesia have two points, but the Socceroos have a game in hand.

Oman, buoyed by their recent maiden Gulf Cup success, went top with a 1-0 win in Kuwait with Hassan Rabea

scoring in the 63rd minute. Later, Kuwaiti coach Mohammed Ibrahim dramatically resigned.

Meanwhile, police said they were investigating after Singapore and Jordanian players were reportedly involved in a mass brawl after the home side won 2-1 in the city-state.

The Straits Times newspaper claimed the Singaporean players were surrounded and assaulted by their angry opponents "armed with plastic bottles, broomsticks and even an electric fan" as they returned to their dressing rooms.

"We were all returning to the dressing room and celebrating the win but the Jordanians swarmed us, punching and kicking our players," centre-back Daniel Bennett was quoted as saying.

The Football Association of Singapore could not immediately be reached for comment. In the match, Agu Casmir got Singapore's opener after 21 minutes, Jordan levelled through a Hatem Aqel penalty before the break and Noh Alam Shah scored the winner for Singapore on 63

minutes. Also in their group, Peter Reid's Thailand held Ali Daei's formidable Iran, three-time champions, to a 0-0 draw in Bangkok while Syria, who are in Group D with China, kept up their perfect record with a second win, a 2-0 success in Lebanon.

Japan, Asian champions in 1992, 2000 and 2004, went down to a 1-0 defeat in Manama with Salman Isa scoring the winner in the 25th minute to give Bahrain their second successive victory.

It was Japan's first defeat following a 2-1 victory over Yemen at home while Bahrain, who lead Group A, won their opener against Hong Kong 3-1.

"Our performance was not good and we will try to bounce back in the next matches," said Japan coach Takeshi Okada.

Elsewhere, a 30th-minute goal from Farhod Tadjiev gave Uzbekistan a 1-0 win over the United Arab Emirates in Sharjah. The UAE stay top of their group after a 5-0 mauling of Malaysia in their opener.

The top two teams in each group qualify for the 2011 finals.



Manchester City striker Craig Bellamy (C) scores the second goal against Newcastle United during their Premier League tie at the City of Manchester Stadium on Wednesday. City won 2-1.