

Anelka gifts Guus win

AFP, Birmingham

Guus Hiddink enjoyed a winning debut as temporary Chelsea manager with a 1-0 Premier League victory away to Aston Villa here Saturday thanks to Nicolas Anelka's 21st goal of the season.

Victory, which saw the Blues leapfrog their opponents into third in the table, was Chelsea's first in a decade at Villa Park.

Hiddink sparked demonstrations in Moscow by fans annoyed at his decision to combine his duties as manager of the Russian national side with that of replacement for Luiz Felipe Scolari at Stamford Bridge for the next 14 weeks.

And Villa manager Martin O'Neill also questioned his ability to combine both roles but the critics will have to wait for ammunition to throw in the direction of the much-travelled Dutchman.

Hiddink wants to rekindle owner Roman Abramovich's love affair with Chelsea and he could not have made a more impressive start, with Chelsea's first win at Villa Park since March 1999. There was a

crackle of excitement back in the air at Chelsea as charged as their manager's electric blue tie.

Victory here was essential for Chelsea if Hiddink wanted to retain any chance of overhauling leaders Manchester United and it was achieved under the watchful eye of Fabio Capello.

The England coach visits Villa Park more regularly than most Premier League grounds these days to monitor the progress of Villa's England youngsters - but the Italian cannot have failed to have been impressed by Frank Lampard.

It was the energy and drive of the Chelsea and England midfielder that took him beyond Stylian Petrov and Curtis Davies in the blink of an eye, before his subtle pass created the cleanest incision in the spread-eagled Villa rearguard for Anelka to exploit.

The Frenchman, one of the few to really flourish under Scolari, made his goal look ridiculously easy as he clipped his 19th minute finish over the on-rushing Brad Friedel for his sixth goal in eight games against Villa for four different clubs.

Friedel's reaction save repelled John Terry's powerful

header from Lampard's corner and the England captain was also denied when another header was cleared off the line by Bulgarian Petrov.

But Villa should have been level just after the half hour when referee Mark Halsey was deceived by Emile Heskey's theatrical fall.

Ashley Young's freekick from the edge of the Chelsea box defeated the motionless Petr Cech before striking the crossbar and there was a sense of justice when Heskey headed the rebound wide from eight yards to the anguish of O'Neill.

Cech may well have contributed to the downfall of Scolari, following his consultations with Amramovich, but he did as much as anyone to ensure Hiddink's start was a winning.

Brazilian defender Alex was certainly grateful to see his agile save at the near post, after his mistake in dealing with Luke Young's hopeful punt allowed Gabriel Agbonlahor a clean sight of the target and the Czech international twice denied Gareth Barry from inviting positions on the edge of the area.

Chelsea had to withstand four Villa attackers for the final 20 minutes as John Carew was

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Chelsea striker Nicolas Anelka (3rd from L) celebrates with teammates after scoring the all-important goal against Aston Villa during their Premiership encounter at Villa Park on Saturday. PHOTO AFP

Venus outlasts Serena

Tennis

AFP, Dubai

Venus Williams edged ahead 10-9 in the family tussle with younger sister Serena to reach the final of the Dubai Open on Friday where she will have the opportunity to capture her second successive title in the Gulf.

The Wimbledon champion won 6-1, 2-6, 7-6 (7/3) against the world number one, producing a sensational display of serving in the first set, and an ability to fight and win crucial points at the net in a fluctuating third.

These are qualities which will make the American hot favourite to beat Virginie Razzano, the surprise finalist from France, and follow up the WTA Championships title she won in nearby Doha in November.

Asked how difficult she still found it to play against her sister, Venus replied: "You know I am always the big sister. I have to stay focussed when I am out there. I can't worry too much whether she is okay. She's an unbelievable player. So I have two problems out there."

It looked increasingly likely that Venus would win for the fifth time in their last seven meetings as the knee problem which caused Serena to pull out of the semifinals in Paris last week appeared gradually to be getting worse.

Despite this, the Australian Open champion continued to play at a high level, and the final set was the best one, everything hinging on a tie-break for only the second time in their 19 encounters.

It was during this exciting climax to one of

the best matches between them that Venus' serving returned to somewhere near the levels which had enabled her to go through the entire first set without dropping a point behind it.

But the final set also depended greatly on a Hawkeye decision which prevented Serena from taking a 4-2 lead, and perhaps continuing the second set momentum which had turned the contest around.

She countered Venus' enterprising approach and well-placed volley with a topspin lob which landed near the baseline and was called in.

Venus, who had earlier twice eschewed appeals to the computerised replay system when it seemed she might have profited by doing so, could not this time resist.

The ball was two inches out, and six rallies later - one of which was the rally of the match, with a brilliant Venus sequence at the net - the struggling older sister had broken back.

After that she looked the more likely winner, moving the better, producing more net attacks, and serving the better, something which saved her in the eleventh game with timely aces on break points.

"I thought Venus played very well, though I didn't serve that great," said Serena, referring to her six double faults in the first set.

"But I look forward to getting fitter. I wasn't at my best physically but this schedule is the most amount of tennis I have played for a long time."

Razzano, the world number 58, put out Kaia Kinepi, the 16th-seeded Estonian, 6-1, 6-2 to reach the final.

"I try to make a lot of pressure all the time and play aggressive," said the flat-hitting, high-intensity Frenchwoman.

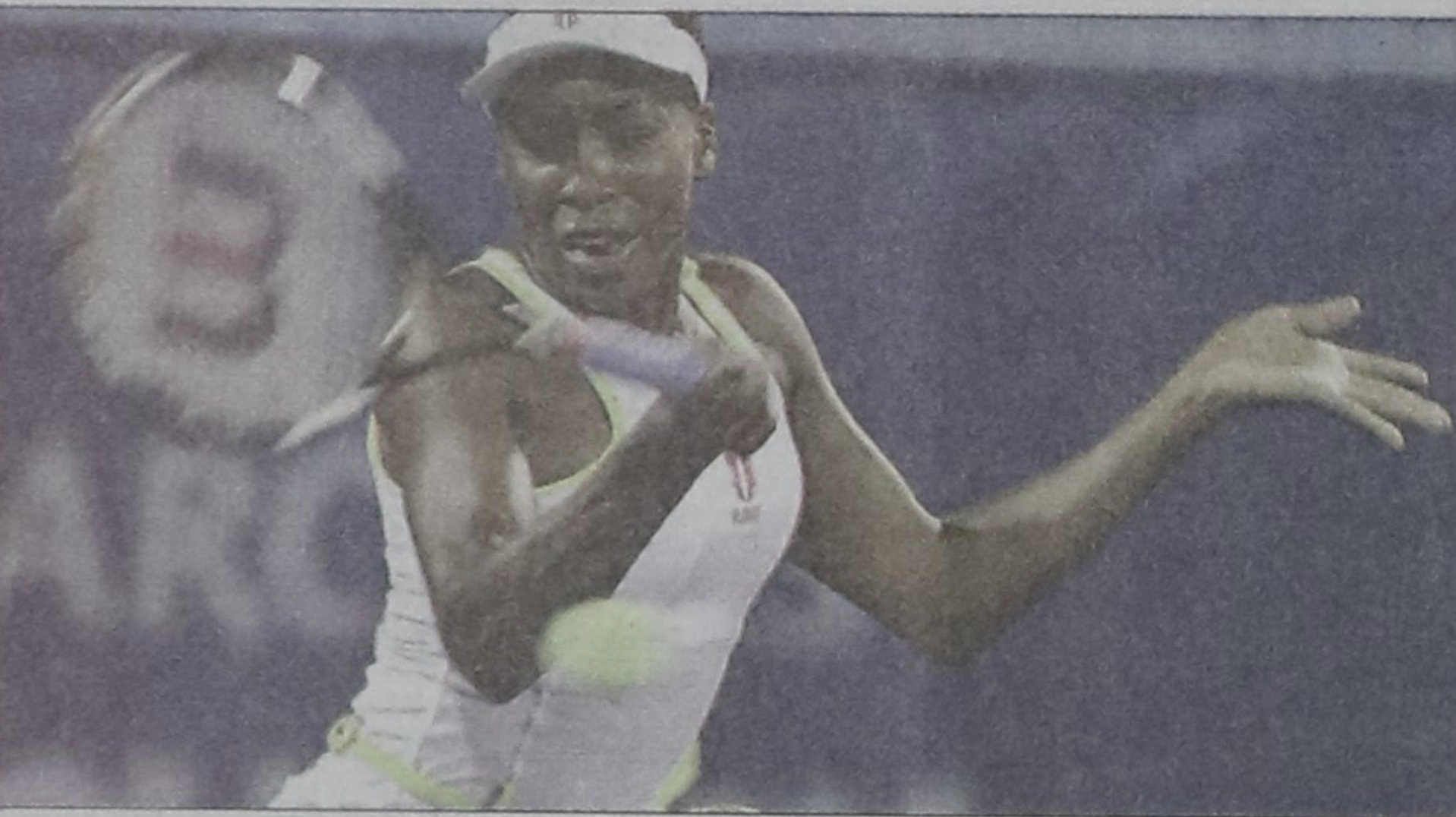


PHOTO: AFP

Venus Williams of the US plays a forehand against her sister Serena Williams during their Dubai Open semifinal on Friday.

Heavy fine for Dubai

Tennis

AFP, St Petersburg

Organisers of the Dubai women's tennis tournament were fined 300,000 dollars by the WTA Tour on Friday after the United Arab Emirates refused to grant a visa to Israeli player Shahar Peer, the WTA said in a statement.

"The actions taken today are intended to redress the wrongs suffered by Shahar Peer, who was victimized by an unjust policy of discrimination by the UAE," WTA Tour chairman Larry Scott said.

"These actions are also intended to send a clear message that our Tour will not tolerate discrimination of any kind and that we will never allow this situation to happen again, in the UAE or elsewhere."

The WTA said the move to fine the tournament was taken at a special meeting of the WTA Tour board on Friday.

The fine, "for breach of Tour Rules, By-Laws and conditions of membership," is the largest ever levied by the tour against a member tournament, the WTA said.

The proceeds of the fine will be used to compensate Peer and her doubles partner Anna-Lena Groenefeld for loss of potential prize money.

Peer will receive 44,250 dollars, an amount

equal to the average prize money that she earned per tournament in 2008, adjusted to take into account increased prize money on offer in 2009.

Groenefeld will receive 7,950 dollars, an amount equal to the average prize money that she earned per tournament in doubles in 2008, also adjusted for 2009 prize money increases.

The balance of the 300,000 will be donated "to a charity or charities, to be determined by the tour in consultation with Ms. Peer."

In addition, the board also demanded that the tournament post a two million-dollar financial performance guarantee by July 1 that several conditions will be met if the event is to be included on the 2010 WTA Tour calendar.

The tournament must provide confirmation of assurances that all players who qualify for the tournament will be allowed to play and will be issued entry visas or permits. Proof of entry permission for any Israeli player who qualifies must be provided at least eight weeks before the 2010 event begins, and if Peer fails to qualify next year she must be offered a wildcard.

The WTA will also award Peer 130 ranking points, an amount equal to the points that she earned in the same week in 2008, when she played in Memphis.

The denial of Peer's visa raised an outcry in tennis, and America's Serena and Venus Williams said they believed the publicity

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Isinbayeva backs Arshavin

AFP, Birmingham

Russian polevault queen Yelena Isinbayeva is aiming for a double celebration on Saturday by setting another world record and hoping compatriot Andrey Arshavin makes a winning Arsenal debut.

Olympic champion Isinbayeva is a supporter of UEFA Cup champions Zenit St Petersburg, the club Arshavin recently left in a 15million-pound (16.88million-euro) deal.

"I think Arshavin is a good player," Isinbayeva said. "He's young and he has a lot of potential and I hope in future he becomes one of the greatest as I think he has the talent."

"I wouldn't like to compare myself and Arshavin, though - he is a footballer and I am a pole vaulter. He can be the best in football and I can be the best in pole vault."

Isinbayeva will be the top draw at the Birmingham indoor meet here on Saturday, while Arsenal tackle Sunderland in London.

Tevez's future uncertain

SOCCERNET

Manchester United striker Carlos Tevez admits he is "not sure" if he will remain at the club beyond this season.

The Argentina international is nearing the end of a two-year loan deal at Old Trafford with United having to negotiate a transfer fee and personal terms if they wish to keep him beyond the summer.

Tevez impressed in his first season but has found opportunities limited during the current campaign since the summer arrival of Dimitar Berbatov.

And he told the Daily Express: "I do have a great feeling about Manchester United and, in particular, the fans. I have a great affection for them and they have made the feeling phenomenal."

"But at this point I am not sure if I will stay, not least because it is not just my decision."

"It is up to Manchester to decide if they want to keep me - and I have to decide what is right for my career, for my future."

Tevez admits he is frustrated at the moment, highlighting his form last year and saying: "But this season I have been benched and I find that hard to understand when I am not playing badly."

The former Corinthians striker also fought his corner over his role in the 'Carlos Tevez affair', relating to penalties suffered by West Ham for breaching rules banning third-party ownership when he played for the Hammers.

He said: "As far as I am concerned, why should it be the Carlos Tevez affair? It is West Ham's affair. This is not my problem and it was not my fault. I did nothing wrong."

He added: "If West Ham have not submitted the documents correctly, that is down to them."

Rafa fires City caution

AFP, Liverpool



Rafael Benitez has warned Liverpool not to underestimate Manchester City on Sunday as his side start a crucial period that will define their season.

With Manchester United entertaining Blackburn on Saturday, the second-placed Reds could trail Sir Alex Ferguson's men by eight points by the time they kick off against City at Anfield.

Only a win will do for Benitez's team this weekend. But, although Liverpool have lost just once in the Premier League this season, they have been held to draws at home by Stoke, Fulham, West Ham, Hull and Everton.

City have had a miserable time away from Eastlands, with the 3-0 win at Sunderland in August their only success in 12 league matches on their travels.

But Benitez is refusing to read anything into City's record and feels a trip to Anfield will bring the best out of Mark Hughes' big name players.

"You can analyse how teams perform away all season but it's different at Anfield," he said.

"The players want to show they are good enough and playing at Anfield is a chance for them to do that."

"You have to forget the

statistics and concentrate on the good players they have."

Hughes, whose team lost 2-0 at Portsmouth last weekend, has noted the success visiting teams have had at Liverpool this season and hopes to see a new solidity in his team.

The City manager also feels that his attacking players can exploit the Reds' desperate need for a victory.

He said: "They will have to come out and try to win the game, so hopefully that will leave spaces in behind that we can exploit."

"They have been frustrated by other teams at Anfield. We have to make sure we have a platform to win the game ourselves."

"We need to be nice and solid, but be a bit better at set-pieces as well as seeing games out to the end, because we have the goals in us."

The City clash marks the start of a crucial period of four games in 10 days for the Reds. Benitez's side travel to the Bernabeu for the first leg of their last 16 Champions League clash with Real Madrid on Wednesday and face games against Middlesbrough and Sunderland before the second leg against the Spanish giants.

Liverpool then have a trip to play Manchester United and Benitez knows that the Reds must take maximum points in their next three Premier League matches in order to stay in touch with the league leaders ahead of their trip to Old Trafford on March 14.

And Benitez, who has ruled Steven Gerrard out of the City game due to his ongoing hamstring problem, admits that Liverpool will know their chances of silverware at the end of that spell of games.

He said: "We have four games in 12 days including Madrid, so you never know what will happen. Maybe in 10-15 days we'll have a clearer idea."

Despite being without Gerrard for the game at Anfield, Benitez is optimistic that his captain will return to action in Spain next week.

"Steven will not be ready for this game. We don't know if he'll be back for the game in midweek but clearly he will not be involved against City," Benitez said.

"He has confidence he will be back for Madrid, but we will decide on Monday."

"He is improving but we cannot take any risks, so he won't be in the squad this weekend."

Hughes feels Benitez's decision to rotate less this season because the reason they have finally mounted a sustained challenge for the title.

"Liverpool have made a better fist of it, and maybe that has come with less squad rotation," he said.

"They have been criticised for changing the team in the past, but this year they haven't, and as a consequence they are having a better challenge."

Ruhr valley derby ends in a draw

AFP, Berlin

Goals by Schalke 04 striker Kevin Kuranyi and Dortmund's Mohamed Zidan either side of half-time meant the Ruhr valley derby ended in a 1-1 draw on Friday.

With league leaders Hertha Berlin playing Saturday, this was a chance for the rivals to climb the table, but Kuranyi's superb early strike for Schalke was cancelled out by Dortmund's supersub Zidan nine minutes from time.

The result leaves Dortmund in eighth and Schalke ninth in the table before the rest of the weekend's Bundesliga programme.

Schalke carved out the advantage early on when Kuranyi scored his second goal in consecutive league games with a superb volley.

His forward partner Halil Altintop supplied the cross and Kuranyi hit a fantastic bicycle-style kick on the full volley which gave Dortmund goalkeeper Roman Weidenfeller no chance on 20 minutes.

Kuranyi went close again with another similar effort moments later as the Royal Blues dominated their rivals at the Veltins Arena in Gelsenkirchen.

Having walked out on the Germany squad at half-time in last October's World Cup qualifier against Russia after being left in the stands, Kuranyi's international career is over.

But his goal, coming after last week's winner at Bochum, was top class and he was a constant thorn in Dortmund's side before fading in the second half.

Dortmund's former Tottenham forward Kevin-Prince Boateng earned himself a first-half yellow card for a heavy challenge after only five minutes and Dortmund coach Juergen Klopp took him off at half-time.

His place was taken by Egyptian striker Zidan and the African squandered a great chance on 76 minutes when Schalke goalkeeper Manuel Neuer saved his shot.

But the Egyptian made no mistake when he played a one-two with Dortmund striker Nelson Valdez and rifled his shot past the diving Neuer.

Drogba slams Scolari

SOCCERNET

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba has hailed Guus Hiddink's arrival at Stamford Bridge and hit out at predecessor Luiz Felipe Scolari for dividing the dressing room.

The Ivory Coast international was singled out for blame by Scolari following the Blues' humiliating 3-0 defeat to Manchester United and Drogba believes that was the beginning of the end for the Brazilian, who was sacked earlier this month.

"When you manage a team like Chelsea, you need to unite the team when things are rough - not divide them."

Depeding on Galaxy's league finish and qualifying for the play-offs, he would either be available to return to Milan in October or November.

Beckham's current loan deal at Milan is due to run out on March 9 while the Major League Soccer season kicks-off on March 22.

If Beckham was to follow Gazzetta's proposal, he would be available for Galaxy's June 6 clash with Toronto, having missed 11 MLS games from a 30-match regular season.

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Milan playing hardball on Beckham deal

Football

AFP, Rome

AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani has insisted that his club won't increase their reported offer of three million dollars to Los Angeles Galaxy to permanently sign on-loan midfielder David Beckham.

Galaxy chief Tim Leiweke had described the offer for the 33-year-old former England captain as ridiculous but Galliani is playing hardball.

Speaking to the Gazzetta dello Sport on Saturday, he said there would be no compromise.

"Milan have made an offer that is fair for what is essentially an eight-month loan deal because, as Leiweke said himself, David can leave for nothing on November 30," said Galliani.

"I don't want to cause any problems, quite the contrary, I want to thank Galaxy for loaning us Beckham these last months."

However, the reported three million dollars on the table will not be increased, despite Galaxy apparently holding out for a figure nearer 12 million dollars.

"Absolutely not. I have a lot of experience with regards the price of players," added

Galliani when asked if Milan would increase their bid.

"And from a point of view regarding the European parameters, there's no sense in spending any more."

"In the States they look at the commercial aspect. But in Europe transfers are done for technical reasons."

"I'm already at the limit of the budget at my disposal." Gazzetta claims that the budget mentioned by Galliani includes not only the transfer fee but also the conditions of Beckham's contract offer until June 2010.

Galliani's comments will not be well received in Los Angeles after Leiweke told Gazzetta just 24 hours earlier that he was determined not to let Beckham go on the cheap.

"Two weeks ago Milan made a ridiculous offer that took me just a few seconds to reject," he said of the reported three million dollar bid.

"With this figure Galaxy wouldn't even be able to cover the loss in revenue from shirt sales."

"They (Milan) don't understand that behind this affair there are fans who are threatening to give up their season tickets, there's TV that needs to schedule which matches they will screen, sponsors who want compensation and other teams that have the right to

know if Galaxy will play in their stadium with or without Beckham.

"And don't forget that under normal circumstances our transfer window is closed. If David doesn't come back, who are we going to replace him with?"

"If Milan are so determined to buy him, why are they dragging this out for so long?"

"If they think they'll get him on the cheap that way, they're wrong."

Gazzetta, however, speculates on a possible solution to the impasse that would see Beckham stay on at Milan until the end of the season before returning to Galaxy in June.

He would then see out the rest of the season with Galaxy before returning to Milan until June 2010.

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