

# L'pool stand in MU's way

AFP, London



Manchester United can effectively wrap up a third consecutive English Premier League title by beating Liverpool in Saturday's eagerly anticipated lunchtime clash at Old Trafford.

Victory would send the Red Devils ten points clear of both Liverpool and Chelsea and it is inconceivable that Sir Alex Ferguson's men would let that kind of advantage slip over the course of their ten remaining fixtures.

Even if Liverpool can perform at the Theatre of Dreams as vibrantly as they did in Tuesday night's 4-0 hammering of Real Madrid and secure all three points, United would remain short-odds favourites to bounce back and win the league.

But a Liverpool win would, at least, offer a glimmer of hope to both Rafael Benitez's men and a revitalised Chelsea, who will be seeking to extend their unbeaten run under temporary manager Guus Hiddink to seven matches when Manchester City visit Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

The problem for the chasing pair is that United have yet to show anything approaching a

whiff of a suggestion that they are about to start dropping points carelessly.

The high number of chances Inter Milan managed to create at Old Trafford in midweek may have offered encouragement to Fernando Torres and co, who emerged as winners when the two sides met at Anfield earlier in the season.

Since then however United have slipped seamlessly through several changes of gear and they will approach Saturday's match seeking a 12th consecutive win in the league.

Wayne Rooney believes the pressure on Liverpool to get all three points will ensure an open game, to United's benefit.

"I think coming to Old Trafford it will be a difficult game for them," said the England striker.

"They know they need to win, they need the three points. I'm sure they will be up for it and we certainly will be, but they know if we beat them it will probably end their chances of winning the league."

Both sides will be close to full strength, although Liverpool will have the advantage of 24 hours additional recovery time from their mid-week exertions.

The recovery factor could be

an issue for Arsenal, who only arrived back in England in the small hours of Thursday morning following their wearying penalty shoot-out victory over Roma.

Arsene Wenger will be relieved Saturday's fixture is at the Emirates but the visit of a Blackburn side that is both desperate for points and on a bit of a run will not be one the Gunners boss anticipates with great relish.

Blackburn are looking significantly better organised under Sam Allardyce and, after taking seven points from their last three matches, have escaped from the drop zone.

Arsenal are unbeaten in 18 matches but they still have a

three-point deficit to make up on Aston Villa, their rivals for the fourth Champions League qualifying spot.

Wenger remains confident that the gap can be bridged and was bolstered in his optimism by the nature of Wednesday night's victory.

"We showed tremendous mental strength in Rome and that makes me so proud because it is a quality that has been questioned this season. It will give us more confidence."

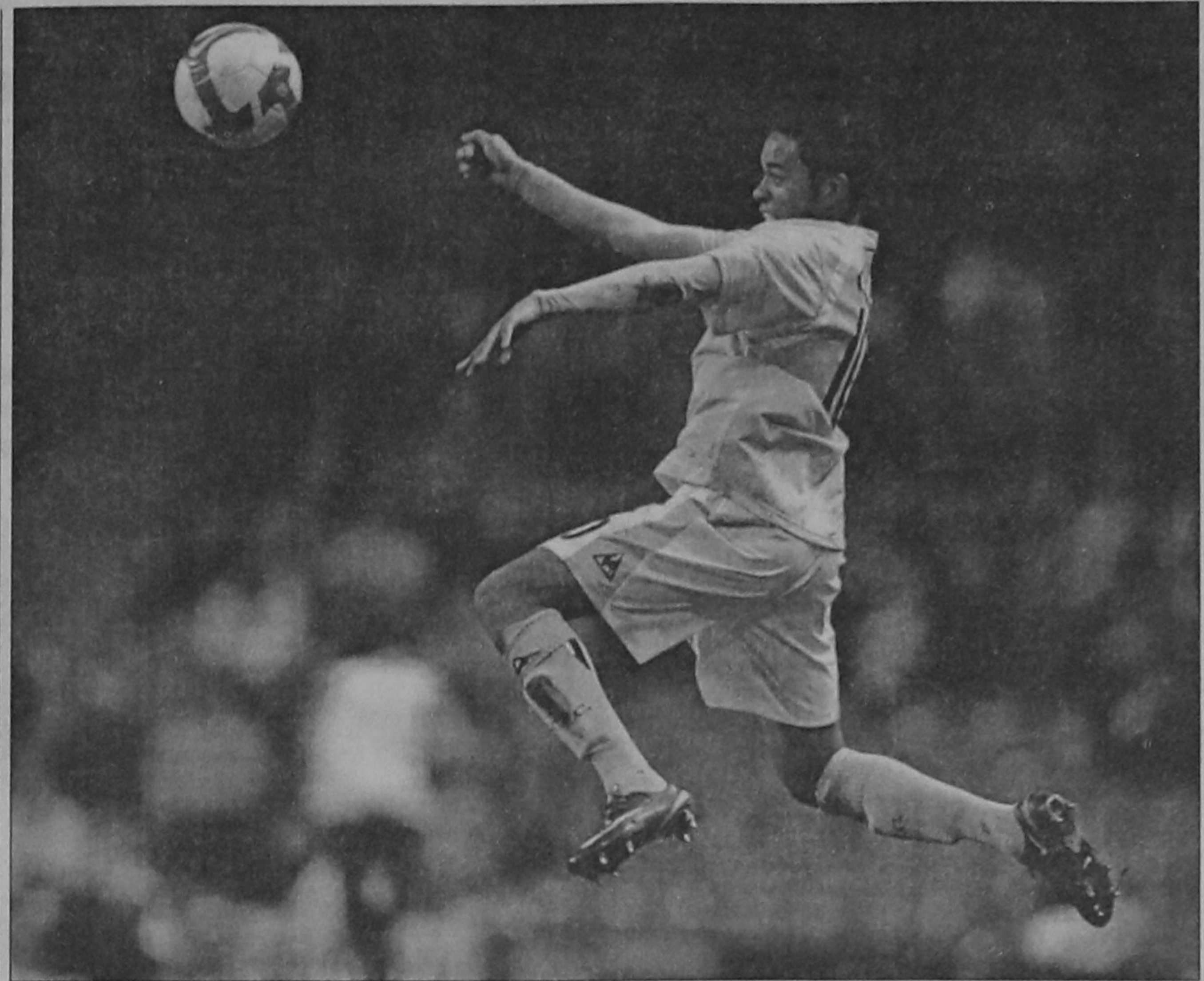
Villa, who have not played since March 4, have to wait until Sunday, when they entertain Tottenham, to see if their sunshine break in Dubai has had the hoped-for rejuvenating effect.

Martin O'Neill's side have taken just one point from their last three league matches while Tottenham will be desperate to keep their heads above the relegation quagmire.

Saturday could be a hugely significant day in the battle for survival with Newcastle travelling to Hull and Middlesbrough, currently second from bottom, entertaining the team immediately above them, Portsmouth.

Newcastle will be bolstered by the return of Michael Owen from his latest injury, an ankle problem that has kept him sidelined for the last six weeks.

FIXTURES	
(1500 GMT unless stated)	
<b>Saturday</b>	Arsenal v Blackburn, Bolton v Fulham, Everton v Stoke City, Hull City v Newcastle, Manchester United v Liverpool (1245 GMT), Middlesbrough v Portsmouth, Sunderland v Wigan
<b>Sunday</b>	Aston Villa v Tottenham (1600 GMT), Chelsea v Manchester City (1330 GMT)
<b>Monday</b>	West Ham v West Brom (2000 GMT)



Manchester City star Robinho goes airborne to control the ball during their UEFA Cup fourth round match against Aalborg at the City of Manchester Stadium on Thursday.

# Real look to bounce back

AFP, Madrid



Following their demoralising Champions League exit to Liverpool on Tuesday all that is left for Spanish champions Real Madrid this season is trying to retain the league where they trail Barcelona by six points.

Real's first visit to Anfield was memorable for all the wrong reasons as Liverpool thrashed them 4-0 - with the tie won 5-0 on aggregate - and the nine-time European champions have now failed to get past the last 16 of the competition since 2004.

Manager Juande Ramos must pick his side up for Saturday's trip to Kings Cup finalists Athletic Bilbao and Real can't afford a European hangover as they pursue Barca in the title race.

"At Real Madrid when things are going great we are among the greatest teams in the world, however, when they are going badly we are the worst club in the world," explained Argentine Gabriel Heinze.

"The Liverpool game was a real setback and I understand the disappointment of the fans because I am sad too. The

only solution is to win on Saturday."

The Liverpool humiliation is the first time Ramos has come under real pressure at Real and the former Tottenham coach will know that managers don't last long at the Santiago Bernabeu.

To make matters worse for Real fans, Barcelona cruised into the quarterfinals of the Champions League with a 5-2 drubbing of Lyon to maintain their treble push.

Pep Guardiola's team are at Almeria on Sunday without any major injury concerns apart from the absence of their versatile captain Carles Puyol.

"We have a few tough months ahead of us but we will go far with this spirit (against Lyon)," said Guardiola. "We have to recover mentally and physically for Almeria and get the win."

Barcelona have a six-point cushion over Real and will be desperate to maintain that lead as they still have to play Real at the Bernabeu.

The alluring fixture this weekend is a Champions League duel between Atletico Madrid and Villarreal at the Vicente Calderon on Sunday.

The two teams had contrasting fortunes in the Champions League knockout stage with Villarreal getting

past Panathinaikos while Atletico were eliminated by FC Porto.

In the league Villarreal occupy fourth, five points ahead of Atletico who will view this as a must-win game.

Atletico coach Abel Resino surprisingly benched Diego Forlan for the Porto game and strike partner Sergio "Kun" Aguiro hinted that he was confused by the tactical switch.

"Playing up front and competing against three defenders is impossible," Aguiro said. "I don't get involved with team selection as that is for the coach, but as far as I am concerned Diego (Forlan) is a key figure in the team."

The pair are expected to be reunited on Sunday as they bid to reel in a Villarreal side

FIXTURES	
<b>Saturday</b>	Valencia v Recreativo Huelva, Athletic Bilbao v Real Madrid
<b>Sunday</b>	Malaga v Sevilla, Valladolid v Getafe, Espanyol v Real Mallorca, Real Betis v Osasuna, Sporting Gijon v Deportivo La Coruna, Racing Santander v Numancia, Atletico Madrid v Villarreal, Almeria v Barcelona

that are starting to motor.

Valencia are a point below Atletico after just one win in their last ten outings and need a home win over Recreativo Huelva on Saturday to keep their fading Champions League hopes alive.

This season Valencia have struggled against the teams at the bottom - losing to relegation-threatened Osasuna, Real Mallorca and Numancia - so they ought to be wary against Recre.

Coach Unai Emery, in his first season at the Mestalla, got the dreaded vote of confidence from the Valencia board this week reflecting the pressure he is under.

Emery started brilliantly with the club top of the table after the first eight games but off-the-field issues - such as unpaid player wages - appear to have dented morale at the cash-troubled club.

Sevilla missed out on the Champions League last season but are on course to qualify in this campaign lying third, a comfortable five points ahead of Villarreal.

On Sunday Sevilla travel to promoted Malaga who are having an incredible season on their return to the top-flight sitting just three points off the top four.

# Kaka back for Brazil

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Fit-again AC Milan star Kaka has been called up by Brazil coach Carlos Dunga for South American 2010 World Cup qualifiers against Peru and Ecuador, it was revealed here on Thursday.

Defenders Miranda of Sao Paulo and Kleber of Inter de Porto Alegre have also been recalled into the side for matches against Ecuador in Quito on March 29 and on April 1 against Peru in southern Brazilian city Porto Alegre. After 10 rounds of matches in the 10-nation group, Brazil are in second spot with 17 points, six behind leaders Paraguay.

SQUAD	
<b>Goalkeepers:</b>	Julio Cesar (Inter/ITA), Doni (Roma/ITA)
<b>Defenders:</b>	Malcon (Inter/ITA), Lucio (Bayern Munich/GER), Daniel Alves (Barcelona/ESP), Kleber (Inter de Porto Alegre), Marcelo (Real Madrid/ESP), Miranda (Sao Paulo), Luisao (Benfica/POR), Thiago Silva (AC Milan/ITA)
<b>Midfielders:</b>	Gilberto Silva (Panathinaikos/GRE), Elano (Manchester City/ENG), Josue (Wolfsburg/GER), Anderson (Manchester United/ENG), Ronaldinho Gaucho (AC Milan/ITA), Julio Baptista (Roma/ITA), Kaka (AC Milan/ITA), Felipe Melo (Fiorentina/ITA)
<b>Strikers:</b>	Robinho (Manchester City/ENG), Luis Fabiano (Sevilla/ESP), Alexandre Palo (AC Milan/ITA), Adriano (Inter Milan/ITA)

# Udinese stun Zenit

AFP, Paris



Udinese's 2-0 victory over defending champions Zenit St Petersburg gave Italy rare cause to celebrate and Manchester City are set fair to reach the UEFA Cup quarterfinals following Thursday's action.

Udine's Antonio Di Natale scored in the seventh minute of injury time following Fabio Quagliarella's 85th minute opener to give Italy some joy as their sole representatives in Europe following their Champions League wipe out before the quarterfinals for the first time in seven years.

Manchester City put one foot in the last eighth with a 2-0 win over Danish side Aalborg at Eastlands.

Brazil forward Robinho returned after missing City's win over Aston Villa last week following a trip home to Brazil for treatment on an ankle injury and on Thursday the player was also named in Brazil's squad for World Cup action.

Felipe Caicedo and Shaun Wright-Phillips bagged first half goals for Mark Hughes side to put them on course for a first eight spot in this second-tier European competition for the first time in 30 years.

Stephen Ireland admitted Manchester City should have killed off Aalborg.

"We should have finished the game off here," he said on ITV. "When we go there next we have to be clever and not concede too early and get on the back foot, but we've done well away from home in Europe this season."

Asked if it was his best goal in City colours, England international Wright-Phillips said: "I'd just like to think so. It came to me and I cut inside and let loose, but like Stevie said the team performance was magnificent and we have to build on it."

Wright-Phillips appeared sporting a heavy icepack on his right ankle having come off four minutes from time, but insisted it was nothing to worry about.

"It's just a bit of a sore ankle but I'll just have to get on with it," he said.

It was an up-and-down night for French clubs with Paris Saint Germain getting a goalless draw with Portugal's Braga, Saint Etienne losing 1-0 at Werder Bremen, though Marseille had an impressive 2-1 victory over Ajax.

PSG coach Paul Le Guen said he was happy with the outcome. "I'm rather satisfied with the match, particularly the second half but I don't know if it will be enough to go through to the quarterfinals. We'll see. I saw a lot of tapes of this team and they played similarly to the ones on the screen and I wasn't surprised."

At Werder Bremen a minute's silence was held for the victims of the Winnenden massacre where 17-year-old Tim Kretschmer shot dead nine pupils and three teachers before killing three other people in the south-west German school.

Over at Hamburg's former Tottenham coach Martin Jol said after their home 1-1 draw with Turks Galatasaray: "In the first-half, we hardly played any football, but after the break we created four or five chances."

Galatasaray coach Buelent Kormaz said: "If you only end up passing the ball back and forth in your own half, nothing happens up front, but at least the result is okay. I congratulate my team about the result."

"We have now a small advantage to take back to Turkey. Our biggest advantage is our stadium with our fans. We will use this to our advantage."

In other matches, CSKA Moscow beat Shakhtar Donetsk, and Dynamo Kiev got a victory over Metalist Kharkov, both with 1-0 scorelines.

Winners after next week's second legs go into the Friday March 20 quarterfinal draw.

# Russia bid for World Cup

AFP, Moscow

Russian Football Union (RFU) has sent an official bid for the right to host either the 2018 or the 2022 World Cup to the world's ruling football body FIFA, local media reported Friday.

"We are still in the race. Today the RFU has sent an official bid to FIFA," the RFU general manager Alexei Sorokin told the press. "They would likely receive it on March 16."

Earlier this year FIFA has invited countries to express interest, by February 2, in hosting the World Cup in either or both 2018 and 2022. It will choose the hosts of both tournaments in December 2010.

Australia, China, England, Indonesia, Mexico, Qatar and Japan are also among the countries that expressed their interest in bidding for the World Cup.

Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as Portugal and Spain, are considering joint bids.

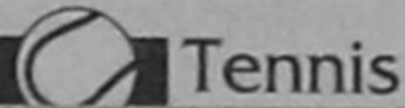
FIFA requires a World Cup host to have about 12 stadiums with more than 40,000 seats each, one of them with more than 80,000 seats.

African countries are precluded from bidding for the 2018 tournament as the next World Cup, in 2010, will be staged in South Africa.

Latin American countries are ruled out of competition for both 2018 and 2022 as Brazil is to host the 2014 event.

The region that provides the host in 2018 will be excluded from consideration for 2022.

# Maria return cut short



AFP, Indian Wells

Maria Sharapova's first test of her surgically repaired right shoulder proved brief as the Russian dropped a doubles decision Thursday in her first competitive match since August.

Sharapova, the former world number one and 2008 Australian Open champion, was hindered by a right shoul-

der injury much of last season and skipped the Beijing Olympics and the US Open before having arthroscopic surgery in October.

She was upbeat despite her abrupt dismissal from the 4.5 million-dollar tournament, as she and partner Elena Vesnina were beaten 6-1, 4-6 (10/7) by Ekaterina Makarova and Tatiana Poutchek in a first-round match that went to a super-tiebreak after they split the first two sets.

"I'm blessed I can have the

opportunity to be here again," she said of her newfound appreciation for her career.

"I don't think I'm going to throw my racquet any more. Just to have the opportunity to step on the court and do what we do."

But Sharapova said she wasn't yet fit enough to play singles - and she refused to be drawn on when she might be.

"It felt good today," Sharapova said. "I think the hump I've got to get through now is to come on court and play two or three sets every day for a week or two weeks."

"Right now I do four days and then I have to take it easy."

After announcing plans to play at the Paris Open and then in Dubai earlier this year, and then deciding she wasn't fit, Sharapova said she would take it as it comes.

"I'm done with setting a timetable for myself," she said. "The 21-year-old said there had been unexpected pleasures as well as frustrations in the wake of her surgery."

"It has been fun in a way. I've gotten to do things and take trips and do things with the family," she said. "I've gotten to appreciate life a little bit more."

However, she has found rehabilitation can be difficult.

"You try to take two steps forward and sometimes you push too much," she said. "My experience is I have a great week practising, or just moving my arm, you feel it's doing really well so you push a little more and then you feel you have to step it down again."

"I can't complain," she added. "I'm a lot better than I was on October 15 when I was under the knife."

Sharapova had been dogged by an injury to her shoulder for more than a year.

"I knew there was something wrong with my shoulder when I was sitting in this press conference last year," said the 21-year-old, who was told she had inflammation in the joint.

# Federer to become a father

AFP, Indian Wells

Roger Federer and longtime girlfriend Mirka Vavrinec are expecting their first baby this summer, the Swiss tennis star announced on his website on Thursday.

"I arrived in Indian Wells earlier this week and I am eager to get back out on court," Federer wrote on www.rogerfederer.com. "My back is feeling much better and I am ready to go."

"I also have some really awesome news to share with all of you: Mirka and I are excited to let you know that we will be parents this summer! Mirka is pregnant and we are so happy to be starting a family together."

"This is a dream come true for us," the 27-year-old added. "We love children and we are looking forward to being parents for the first time. Mirka is feeling great and everything is going well."

Federer, the former world number one, met the press in Indian Wells on Wednesday as he prepared for the first Masters series event of the season, but didn't make a mention of the happy news.

Instead the 13-time Grand Slam champion focused on his recovery from a lingering back ailment, which has seen him out of action since he lost the Australian Open final to Rafael Nadal, and on his eagerness to renew his rivalry with his Spanish foe.

# Bayern target top spot

AFP, Berlin



Fresh from setting records in the Champions League, Bayern Munich coach

Jurgen Klinsmann has Bundesliga leaders Hertha Berlin in his sights on Saturday as the defending champions return to domestic matters.

Hertha are four points clear at the top of the Bundesliga and host Bayer Leverkusen this weekend, while third-placed Bayern are strugglers Bochum.

There is precious little to choose from at the top of the German league with Hoffenheim, Wolfsburg and Hamburg all locked on 42 points with Hertha clear on 46 points.

Having smashed Sporting Lisbon 12-1 on aggregate in the Champions League Round of 16 tie, including a 7-1 hammering on Tuesday at Munich's Allianz Arena in the second leg, Bayern are now focused on bossing Bochum.

"I reckon we have every chance of winning the league: we'll re-double our efforts to put Hertha under pressure," said Klinsmann.

Bayern expect to have midfielder Franck Ribery back from a shin injury although striker Luca Toni is still struggling with an Achilles tendon injury and misses out.

His place up front along-

side Miroslav Klose will go to Lukas Podolski who has scored three goals in his last two games.

Bochum are just two points off the relegation zone, but have picked up wins over Karlsruhe, Schalke and Cottbus in recent weeks.

They will be looking to bring down to earth a Bayern side who have set records for both margin of victory and aggregate scoreline in a post-group stage knockout tie in the Champions League in midweek.

Hertha are unbeaten at home at Berlin's Olympic Stadium in their last nine matches and midfielder Patrick Ebert says the difference is their supporters.

"Our fans make the difference," said the 21-year-old. "Attendances are increasing game by game and maybe the Leverkusen game will be a sellout."

"Of course, it is great for us players to play in front of huge crowds at our stadium. Our fans get right behind us even when things are not going too well. I think that is

the main reason for our current success."

Second-placed Hoffenheim are at Eintracht Frankfurt having dropped off the pace in recent weeks and have now gone five league games without a win.

With strikers Carlos Eduardo Marques and Chinedu Obasi both failing in front of goal in the absence of injured hot-shot striker Vedad Ibisevic, Hoffenheim coach Ralf Rangnick looks set to play a 4-3-3 formation.

After hammering Hamburg 4-1 last weekend, Borussia Moenchengladbach are finally off the bottom of the table and will be wanting to take at least a point from their trip to Cologne.

In Saturday's other games, mid-table Hanover 96 host Borussia Dortmund while bottom side Karlsruhe are home to Arminia Bielefeld, who hover just above the relegation zone.

Because of their UEFA Cup commitments, Werder Bremen host Stuttgart on Sunday desperate to reverse their poor league record having failed to win a Bundesliga game in 2009.

Bremen are without the banned Naldo and midfielder Mesut Ozil has an injured knee, while striker Mario Gomez is in top form who has scored seven goals in his last six league games.

And Hamburg host Energie Cottbus desperate to get back into the title race after last week's upset by Moenchengladbach.



Russian star Maria Sharapova addresses a press conference during the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP