

Williams meets William

AFP, Melbourne

She may be the world's top tennis player and the winner of multiple Grand Slams but Serena Williams was left giggling like a schoolgirl when she talked about meeting Prince William.

Serena was in the middle of a mundane press conference after beating Carla Suarez Navarro in the Australian Open third round on Saturday when someone asked her about meeting the prince when he was at the tennis two days ago.

"It was super cool -- Prince William was really dapper and suave. You know, he was just basically, shazam," she said with a laugh.

"I wasn't really nervous to meet him, he was my age. I kind of always wanted to meet him, so it was cool."

Serena said she joked with William about their respective siblings.

"I told him that I might like his little brother better because he's the little brother, and he laughed and said he might like Venus better because she's older," she said.

"So we just had a little joke about that."

Asked if she and Venus should consider a double date with William and Harry, she said "Not unless Leo is there," revealing her crush on Hollywood heartthrob Leonardo DiCaprio.

"Every time I see Leonardo DiCaprio I get totally speechless. Every time I'm like, Hi."

Sendros to join Everton

AFP, London

Arsenal's Swiss defender Philippe Sendros is set to join Premiership rivals Everton on loan until the end of the season, according to the Goodison Park club.

The 24-year-old Swiss international joined the Gunners in December 2002, but has found himself surplus to requirements and spent last season on loan at Serie A side AC Milan.

A statement on Everton's website, www.evertonfc.com, confirmed the deal is expected to be concluded in the coming days.

"Everton and Arsenal have agreed a deal to bring Swiss international defender Philippe Sendros to Goodison Park," it said. "The formalities of the transfer will be finalised in the next 48 hours and Sendros will be on Merseyside this afternoon (Saturday) to watch his new team in action against Birmingham in the FA Cup fourth round."

Sendros was a part of the Arsenal side which won the 2005 FA Cup at the expense of Manchester United, and has 33 caps for Switzerland.

Ciro dismisses Guus link

AFP, Rome

Defiant Juventus coach Ciro Ferrara on Friday blasted speculation linking Russia coach Guus Hiddink with his job ahead of Saturday's visit of AS Roma.

The under fire boss is in desperate need of a victory, not just for his own future but also to maintain his team's hopes of finishing this season in a Champions League qualification position.

And he reacted angrily when asked about reports in the Russian press earlier this week from Hiddink's agent that the Dutchman had turned down an offer from Juve.

"I have more belief in the words of our president (Jean-Claude Blanc) who has assured me there has been no such contact," he said.

"It's not the first time that agents or coaches have said things. I certainly wouldn't have refused such an offer."

"In this type of situation there's always someone trying to exploit it to promote someone else.

"If it's discussed every day, then Ferrara's position must be under threat and whoever might be coming looks after his own interests, sometimes in a way that is not correct."

Ferrara's team has lost seven of its last 10 matches, during which time they crashed out of the Champions League group stages and have fallen from second to fifth in the Serie A table.

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Caroline Wozniacki of Denmark celebrates her win against Shahar Peer of Israel during their Australian Open third round encounter in Melbourne on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

GHANA V ANGOLA

All set for electric tie

AFP, Luanda



Hosts Angola and Ghana meet here on Sunday in what promises to be an electric Africa Cup of Nations quarterfinal played out in front of the competition hosts' 50,000 fan base at the 11 November stadium.

The build-up has been dominated by claims from the Ghana Football Association of "intimidatory" tactics by Angolan security forces designed they say to destabilise the team.

A Ghana fan and journalist have both been subjected to assaults by Angolan police in Luanda this week, but GFA spokesman Randy Abbey insisted Ghana would not be distracted from Sunday's quarterfinal.

"Psychologically this will not affect the team," Abbey said.

"That is why the leaders of the team have decided to take up this pressure and stress and allow the players to relax and focus on the match itself."

"If it's a new form of tactics, then they better think of breaking our legs as well," he added.

World Cup qualifiers Ghana made it through to the last eight as Group B runners-up after a 3-1 loss to Ivory Coast and a 1-0 win over Burkina Faso.

Angola ensured their Cup party continued with an opening 4-4 draw to Mali, a 2-0 win over

Malawi and a contentious goalless draw with Algeria to finish top of Group A.

Ghana, who are seeking to end a 27-year title drought, go into Sunday's game buoyed by the return to fitness of Rennes striker Asamoah Gyan and Rosenborg midfielder Anthony Annan.

Coach Milovan Rajevic has had to rely heavily on his squad's younger members after a raft of injuries to key players, the latest Chelsea star Michael Essien's training setback in the run up to Tuesday's final Group B tie against Burkina Faso.

Annan missed both first round games while Gyan had to come off injured against Burkina Faso.

One of Ghana's absentees is influential captain Stephen Appiah, who has urged the young Black Stars side to approach every game as though it were the final itself.

"I would like to congratulate the Black Stars for making the quarter-finals despite the immense pressure they were under," Appiah wrote on his personal website.

"They showed character and determination in beating Burkina Faso and I am really pleased with their reaction after losing to Ivory Coast. It takes a lot of mental strength and they did very well."

"From here on in, it is going to be difficult because every game is a final. One strike and you are out, so they need to keep believing in themselves and fighting to the end in every game."

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'Concentration the key'

AFP, Rome



AC Milan forward Ronaldinho said his team will need to concentrate for 90 minutes against Inter Milan on Sunday to avoid a repeat of the 4-0 thrashing they suffered earlier this season.

Milan looked destined for a long hard season when they crumbled at home to the champions in only rookie coach Leonardo's second game in charge.

That defeat put such a dent in the team's confidence that they managed only three wins and a paltry six goals in their first nine matches in all competitions.

But since then Milan, and Ronaldinho in particular, have rebounded in spectacular fashion leading to one of the most eagerly anticipated Milan derbies in recent years, seen as a genuine title clash.

"If we don't arrive at this derby in good condition we could risk losing by the same result (as in August)," Ronaldinho told Sky Sport.

"We must concentrate for 90 minutes so that what happened in the first derby does not happen again. We need to win and go home with the three points."

Ronaldinho has been pivotal in Milan's rise

after an inglorious first season in Italy.

Having lost his way in his last season at Barcelona, during which he fell out of favour with coach Frank Rijkaard, he came to Milan citing the need for a change of scenery and new stimuli.

But despite beginning well in the first half of the season he fell out of favour during the second half of the campaign and hardly played.

But now he is back and five goals in his last two matches are testament to just how much Ronaldinho has improved since his darkest days.

"What's the reason for the comeback in my form? I'm not playing alone, we're talking about a great moment for the team, from (goalkeeper) Dida to (targetman Marco) Borriello," said the 30-year-old.

"Everyone is playing well and so it's easier for everyone. My job is simple, create goals and score some as well if it's possible."

"If everyone's pulling their weight, things go well for me."

Ronaldinho's improved form has sparked talk of a recall to Dunga's Brazil team, but the former Barca man doesn't want to think about that.

"I'm not thinking about that at the moment, my head is 100 per cent on doing well for Milan, helping the team and letting things happen naturally."

IN BRIEF

Del Neri denies Cassano bust up

AFP, Rome

Sampdoria coach Luigi Del Neri denied on Friday that he has had a bust up with star striker Antonio Cassano.

Del Neri dropped his errant forward from the squad that will travel to Udinese on Sunday but claimed it was purely a technical decision.

"Cassano has not been picked due to a technical choice. There's been no dispute, away from home I need more effort and less flair," said the coach.

"We've spoken and I explained my ideas to him but there was no argument, we had a serious conversation between two men."

"I want forwards who know how to press. It's a normal selection for a coach and normal for a player to accept it, as has happened."

Ghana journalist beaten up

AFP, Luanda

A sports radio journalist from Ghana covering the Africa Cup of Nations was beaten up by Angolan security officers in what was described as a "brutal" attack here on Friday.

The reporter, who was named as Fiifi Tackie, working for private radio station Radio Gold, was set upon by police and security officials after being refused access to a press conference at the team's hotel in the Angolan capital.

One witness, Ghana journalist Franck Abdai, told AFP: "The reporter was denied permission to attend the press conference, and was surrounded by security officers and police and beaten up."

"He was arrested but later released."

Abdai said the Ghana Football Federation had requested tighter security ahead of Sunday's Africa Cup of Nations quarterfinal showdown with hosts Angola.

Ghana radio station Peace FM reported on its website: "The journalist was brutally attacked."

Sisters keep on track



AFP, Melbourne

Serena and Venus kept on track for an all-Williams semifinal while a pair of in-form Eastern Europeans set up a fourth round showdown at the Australian Open Saturday.

Serena thrashed Carla Suarez Navarro 6-0, 6-3 and will now face local favourite Samantha Stosur, while Venus outlasted Australian Casey Dellacqua 6-1, 7-6 (7/4).

Fourth seeded Dane Caroline Wozniacki was also impressive as she downed Israel's Shahar Peer 6-4, 6-0 on the back of a superb serving game.

But judging by the way Serena saw off Suarez Navarro, the defending champion is still the one to beat for the title.

She raced to a 5-0 lead in just 15 minutes and although the Spaniard recovered and fought back, the world number one was always in control.

Stosur, a 6-4, 6-1 winner over Italian Alberta Brianti, will play Serena in a marquee clash on Monday, and the pair have some history.

The showdown is sure to create plenty of interest, with Stosur beating the world number one the last time they met.

Williams then added fuel to

the fire by accusing Stosur of being a good "framer", implying many of her winning shots of being miss hits.

Whether she genuinely forgets or whether she just wants to stay onside with Stosur's vocal Australian fans, Williams insisted she could not recall saying anything negative about her rival.

"I don't remember that," she said when asked about the incident.

"I just remember I hit some great shots and she returned them back for winners."

Stosur will have her work cut out against Williams, although it was far from plain sailing for Serena.

She was made to run all over the court, but showed her superb athleticism as she chased down many of the Spaniard's best shots and returned them with interest.

Meanwhile, Venus said she had made changes to her game in the off-season, which helped her against Dellacqua.

"Obviously with professional sports you can't remain stagnant -- every off-season I'm thinking of which ways I can play better," she said, before declining to say exactly what changes she had made.

Whatever the adjustments were, they seemed to work as she won the first set comfortably.

However, she was made to graft a lot harder for the second.

In the end it took the sixth seed one hour, 47 minutes to subdue Dellacqua and book a fourth round meeting with 17th seeded Italian Francesca Schiavone, who upset 10th seed Agnieszka Radwanska 6-2, 6-2 earlier in the day.

Lurking in the shadows are Belarusian seventh seed Victoria Azarenka and ninth seeded Russian Vera Zvonareva, who continued to steamroll their way through the draw.

Azarenka thumped Italian Tathiana Garbin 6-0, 6-2 and Zvonareva was too good for Argentine Gisela Dulko 6-1, 7-5.

Azarenka, who had Serena on the ropes in the fourth round in 2009 before succumbing to illness and the extreme hot weather, has lost just eight games in the first three rounds, while Zvonareva has dropped only 11.

The 20-year-old Azarenka said she had put the disappointment of 2009 behind her.

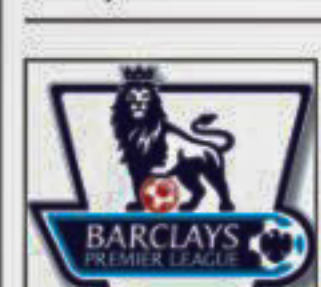
"I already forgot about last year -- I have nothing to make up for," she said.

China's Li Na joined countrywoman Zheng Jie in the fourth round with a 7-5, 3-6, 6-2 win over Slovakia's Daniela Hantuchova, the first time two Chinese players have been in the round of 16 in the same Grand Slam.

She faces Wozniacki in the fourth round.

Fergie targets 82 pts

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson believes that a points total as low as 82 could be enough to win the Premier League this season.

United have already lost eight games in all competitions this season, and, unusually had slipped to five Premier League defeats before the turn of the year.

Chelsea, who have suffered four Premier League defeats, have also passed up the chance to take hold of the title race, with Arsenal, who were written off in the early part of the campaign, leading the table ahead of United's game against Hull.

Ferguson's side have picked up seven points from their last three matches but had 40 points at the half-way stage in the campaign.

The United manager, who is looking for a record fourth straight Premier League trophy, thinks that any team that puts a run of form together will take the title.

A tally of 82 points has not been enough to win the league since United won the Premier League with just 80 points in 2000.

Last season United pipped Liverpool by four points with a final total of 90 and picked up 89 and 87 in 2007 and 2008.

Chelsea's two title victories saw them gain 95 and 91 points respectively in 2004 and 2005.

But Ferguson thinks that there will be nothing like that this time around. "The title race is

looking more complicated this season. I think it's going to be the lowest points total to win the title for a while," he said.

"Maybe 82 will do it, whereas we won it with 90 last season. It's going to be a tough race."

"What's made it that way is the number of teams who are challenging to get into the top four."

"And, of course Arsenal's consistency in the past few weeks has made it a three-way fight at the top."

"They are winning games now and that underlines what I've been saying about the need for consistency of results."

"That's what will give any of the front-runners a chance this season."

"When they lost to Chelsea at the end of November, even Arsenal themselves admitted it was going to be difficult for them. They were well beaten that day."

"But teams dropping points and Arsenal hitting a good run has put them back on top and they will feel they are in with a great chance."

United face Arsene Wenger's side next Sunday and the Gunners face Chelsea the week after.

It is a crucial period of the campaign and United have regularly put together a consistent run at this stage of the season to win titles and Ferguson thinks it could be a defining period.

"They've got us next Sunday and then they have to go to Chelsea the following week so, it's going to be interesting," said Ferguson.

"I think that we're now only two points adrift of where we were this time last season."

Spurs won't buy Ruud



AFP, London

Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp on Friday all but ruled out a move to bring Ruud van Nistelrooy to White Hart Lane because of the level of the Real Madrid striker's wages.

West Ham have reportedly made the Dutchman an offer of a short-term deal on 100,000 pounds a week while Turkish side Galatasaray, German club Hamburg and Stoke are also reported to be interested in signing the for-

mer Manchester United forward.

Redknapp admitted that Spurs chairman Daniel Levy would be reluctant to shatter the club's wage structure in order to land van Nistelrooy, who is keen to be playing regularly in the run-up to the World Cup.

"Daniel, the chairman here, runs a good business and wouldn't be paying that sort of money," Redknapp said.

"It would break our wage structure by an awful long way. He's probably worth it and is probably earning an awful lot more at Real Madrid. He's

been a great player and could still be that for someone."

"It's a gamble because he has been injured. A fit Ruud van Nistelrooy is world-class but it's a gamble as to whether he's fit. If you have him for 18 months and he's not fit it's a big problem to have a massive wage on your bill."

"But if he plays and scores he can take the club to another level. I've always been a big admirer of him, he's a fantastic player but that sort of basic wage wouldn't be a possibility at Tottenham. Not a chance."

Steve Bruce has insisted he will not allow Kenwyne Jones to leave Sunderland on loan and voiced his frustration at persistent speculation linking the Trinidad and Tobago striker with a move to Liverpool.

"Kenwyne Jones is not going to go on loan to anybody to help Liverpool or anybody else," Bruce said on Friday. "I would be mad."

Bruce did not rule out selling the striker but questioned whether Liverpool had the funds to pay the "huge amount of money" it would take for Sunderland to let one of their prize assets leave.

The Sunderland boss added: "I haven't even got a price because I don't think Liverpool can go there. It's like me asking for Steven Gerrard on loan - I'll try, maybe. It's hugely disrespectful."

Burnley meanwhile have signed France under-21 striker Frederic Nimani from Monaco on an initial five-month loan.

The 21-year-old becomes new Claret's boss Brian Laws' first signing since taking over at Turf Moor.

Manchester City have loaned Slovakia winger Vladimir Weiss to Bolton until the end of the season.

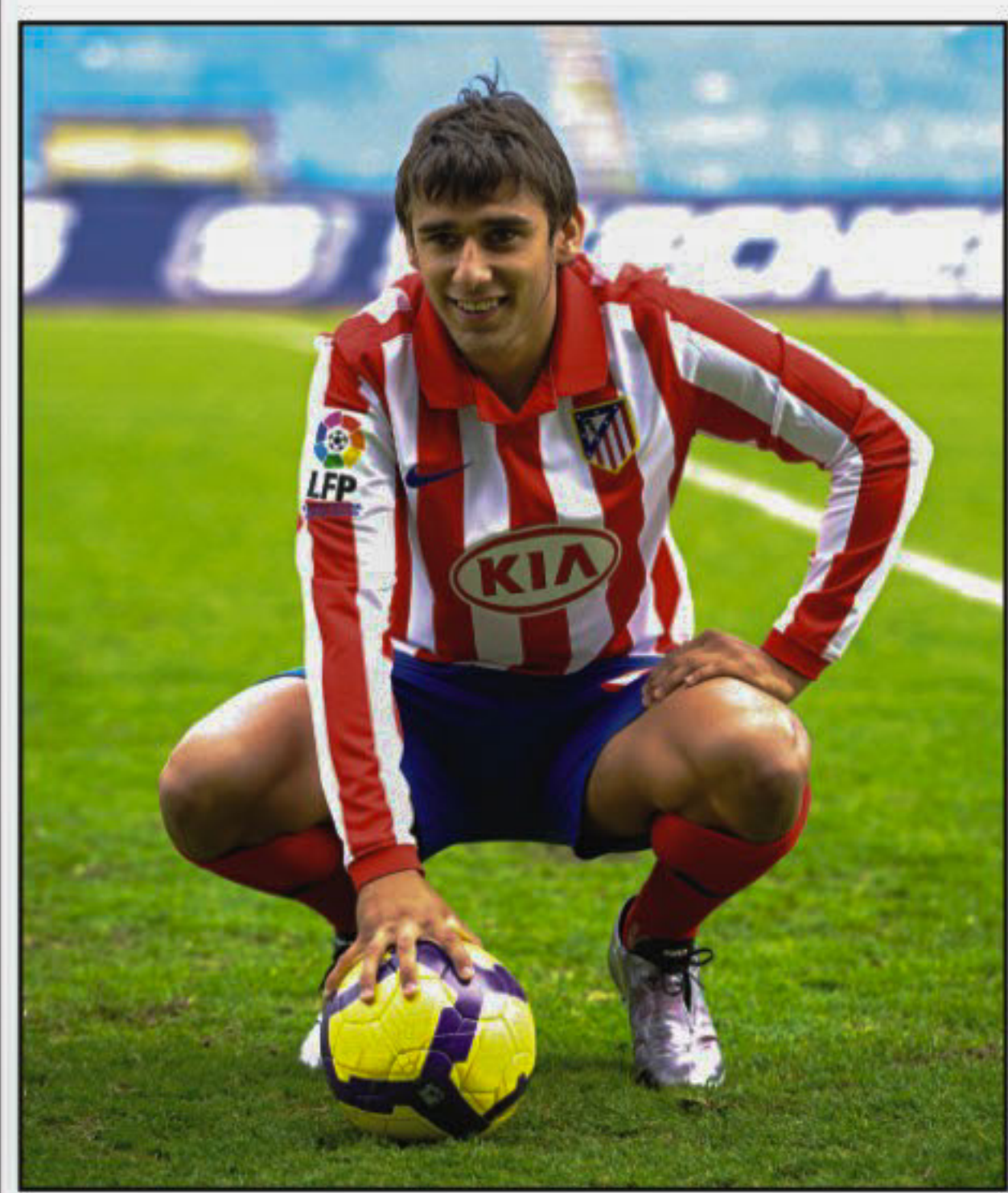


PHOTO: AFP

Atletico Madrid's new signing Argentine striker Eduardo Salvio poses during his official presentation at the Vicente Calderon Stadium on Friday.