

Zvonareva demolishes world No. 1

AFP, Hong Kong

Russian tennis ace Vera Zvonareva threw down the gauntlet ahead of the Australian Open with an awe-inspiring demolition of world number one Caroline Wozniacki in Hong Kong on Saturday.

The 26-year-old took just 56 minutes and dropped just one game as she thrashed the Dane 6-1, 6-0 on the back of an equally ruthless straight-sets win over Venus Williams at the exhibition tournament.

"It was a great match and I played some good tennis," Zvonareva said of her mesmerising performance, to cheers from the capacity crowd at the 3,600 Victoria Park stadium.

"I'm just happy to be back here in Hong Kong. I'm enjoying the atmosphere -- everyone came here to support us. It was my first two matches out here in Hong Kong to start the season and I'm definitely excited about it."

Wozniacki, 20, who rose to the top of the rankings in October last year, topped the bill at this week's Hong Kong Tennis Classic World Team Challenge.

But it was her Russian rival who has emerged as the player to be feared when the Australian Open starts in Melbourne on January 17.

Zvonareva, who enjoyed a career-best season last year, pounced on her opponent's weak second serve without mercy and overwhelmed the Dane at the baseline, taking the first set in just 25 minutes.

Wozniacki, renowned for her consistency, made an uncharacteristic 10 unforced errors against just one winner in the first set and quickly dropped two service games in the second as Zvonareva took complete control.



Vera Zvonareva of Russia representing Team Russia (L) shakes hands with Denmark's Caroline Wozniacki of Team Europe on the final day of the Hong Kong Tennis Classic World Team Challenge in Hong Kong yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Perez rules out winter signings

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid chairman Florentino Perez has told coach Jose Mourinho he cannot sign a new striker in the winter transfer window to cover for the injured Gonzalo Higuain, a sports newspaper said Saturday.

The Portuguese coach is concerned that with Higuain ruled out for at least another two months he has only Cristiano Ronaldo and the out-of-form French striker Karim Benzema to rely on up front.

But Perez believes that "with Benzema, Cristiano, Higuain from March and the pool (of players), there is more than enough," the Marca daily quoted him as saying.

"There'll be no signings," Perez said.

Higuain is to undergo surgery in the United States to fix a slipped disc that has already kept him out of action since late November, Real said Thursday.

Liverpool sack Hodgson

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool on Saturday announced that manager Roy Hodgson has left the club by mutual consent, with Kenny Dalglish put in charge for Sunday's FA Cup tie against Manchester United.

Hodgson leaves Anfield after an unhappy six month reign after taking over from Rafael Benitez with Liverpool having suffered a ninth Premier League defeat on his watch at Blackburn this week.

That left the embattled side languishing in 12th position, four points above the relegation zone.

The 63-year-old former Fulham boss had hoped that a bright performance against United at Old Trafford this weekend might save his position but Liverpool's owners New England Sports Ventures (NESV) decided otherwise.

The writing looked on the wall for Hodgson when the club cancelled his weekly scheduled press conference on Friday.

In a statement on the club's website,



principal owner John Henry said: "We are grateful for Roy's efforts over the past six months, but both parties thought it in the best interests of the club that he stand down from his posi-

tion as team manager.

"We wish him all the best for the future."

Hodgson added: "Being asked to manage Liverpool football club was a great privilege.

"Any manager would be honoured to manage a club with such an incredible history, such embedded tradition and such an amazing set of fans.

"Liverpool is one of the great clubs in world football. I have, however, found the last few months some of the most challenging of my career.

"I am very sad not to have been able to put my stamp on the squad, to be given the time to bring new players into the club in this transfer window and to have been able to be part of the rebuilding process at Liverpool.

"The club has some great, world-class players, with whom it has been a pleasure to work and I wish the entire squad well for the rest of the season."

City snap up Dzeko

AFP, Manchester

English Premier League title-chasers Manchester City on Friday completed the signing of Bosnia and Herzegovina striker Edin Dzeko from German club Wolfsburg.

The 24-year-old, who is believed to have cost City 27 million pounds (32.5 million euros) has signed a four-and-a-half year contract and has been handed the number 10 shirt at the Eastlands club.

"It has been a long time that I have been linked with the club going back to last summer but Wolfsburg did not want to sell me until today," Dzeko, who is likely to make his debut next weekend against Wolves, told City's official website.

Dzeko scored 10 goals in 17 league games this season for Wolfsburg and becomes City boss Roberto Mancini's ninth signing since the former Inter Milan coach took charge just over a year ago.



NEO Cricket
New Zealand v Pakistan
First Test, Day 3
Live from 4:00am
TEN Action+
La Liga
Real Madrid v Villarreal



Bangladesh League
Feni Soccer Club v Brothers Union
Venue: Feni Stadium
Start: 2:30 pm
Sheikh Russel KC v Rahmatganj MFS
Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa Kamal Stadium



PHOTO: AFP

Uzbekistan midfielder Server Djeparov performs a somersault after scoring the second goal against Qatar during their Asian Cup encounter at the Khalifa Stadium on Friday.

Uzbekistan off to a flier

Football

AFP, Doha

Odil Akhmedov and Server Djeparov shattered Qatari dreams with second-half goals to hand Uzbekistan a 2-0 win over the below-par hosts in the opening game of the Asian Cup on Friday.

Central defender Akhmedov bagged the first goal of the tournament when he sent a looping 30-yard shot crashing off the underside of the bar and into the net in the 58th minute.

Captain Djeparov sealed the win 18 minutes later when he made the most of a sloppy back pass by Ibrahim Majed, firing the ball past goalkeeper Qasem Burhan.

The football festival, featuring the region's top 16 teams, runs for three

weeks up to the final on January 29 with the opening match played at the Khalifa Stadium, the 40,000-capacity jewel in Qatar's footballing crown.

The hosts signalled their intentions early on with Brazil-born midfielder Fabio Cesar getting the first chance of the game, steering a header wide after a probing cross by Hussain Yaser.

But the pressure got to them and they gave the Uzbeks too much space with Alexander Geynrikh breaking free of his marker to rattle the post barely a minute later.

The Qatari back line was ragged and Geynrikh again burst free to find Jasur Khasanov in the six-yard box, with the speedy winger's shot forcing a scrambled save from Burhan.

Uzbekistan may not have made their Asian Cup debut until 1996, but

they have improved with each participation.

Eliminated in the group phase on their competition debut 15 years ago, the Central Asian heavyweights suffered the same fate four years later but have since reached the quarter-finals at successive tournaments.

Playing in perfect 22 degrees Celsius conditions, they displayed their emerging pedigree.

Khasanov should have put them in front on 18 minutes when he found himself in acres of space, only to take a touch too much and angle his shot wide of the post.

Uzbekistan were dominating possession and Qatar barely got a look in until seven minutes before half-time when Cesar curled a left-footed freekick round the wall and onto the post.

Cesc rescues Arsenal

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal needed a last-gasp penalty from captain Cesc Fabregas to snatch a dramatic 1-1 draw with Leeds on Saturday as the Championship outfit were denied a famous FA Cup third round upset.

Fabregas blasted home a nerveless spot-kick in the 90th minute after Leeds defender Ben Parker had tugged Theo Walcott off balance to cancel out a Leeds penalty from Robert Snodgrass.

Arsenal could have snatched victory in injury time only for Leeds keeper Kasper Schmeichel to pull off a stunning save from a Denilson shot.

Nicklas Bendtner also pulled a golden opportunity wide as Arsenal rallied furiously for the goal which would allow them to avoid a replay at Elland Road.

IN brief

Metalist sign Blanco

AFP, Buenos Aires

Midfielder Sebastian Blanco on Friday became Ukrainian side Metalist Kharkiv's third Argentine player when he signed from Lanus for six million euros.

The 23-year-old joins compatriots Jonathan Cristaldo and Cristian Villagra, formerly of Velez Sarsfield and River Plate respectively, at Metalist.

Blanco played 141 times for Lanus, scoring 19 goals.

Sidwell joins Fulham

AFP, London

Former Chelsea midfielder Steve Sidwell returned to his native London on Friday when he signed for Fulham for an undisclosed fee on an initial six-month deal.

The 28-year-old Sidwell, who had also interested Wolves and West Ham, joined Aston Villa from Chelsea in 2008 after initially making an impact in the top flight with Reading.

"I'm delighted my move to Fulham has been finalised, and I'm looking forward to training with the squad and helping the club make steady progress up the table in the second half of the season," he said.

Khumalo completes Spurs switch

AFP, London

South African international defender Bongani Khumalo completed his switch from Supersport United to Tottenham on Friday promising to bring his "addiction" to winning to the English Premier League side.

The 23-year-old joined Spurs after impressing for his country and club with whom he won three consecutive league titles.

"I want to win games here, I want to win titles - that's what the game's about," the defender told Spurs' official website after signing a four-and-a-half year deal.

'Pep is world's best'

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Josep Guardiola is the world's best coach, the Spanish club's Argentine international Lionel Messi said Friday in a television interview.

"For me it is Guardiola, I think he has shown it. It does not just depend on winning titles, but also on how he makes a team play," the winger told Spanish public television TVE when asked who he felt was the world's best manager.

The 39-year-old has led Barcelona to seven trophies in two seasons, including the 2009 Champions League and two successive La Liga crowns.

Footballer fakes kidnapping

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

A Brazilian footballer who faked his own kidnapping to get out of a team training session faces up to six months in prison, police said Friday.

Somalia, a player for the Rio club Botafogo, made a police report Wednesday alleging he had been carjacked by an armed man and forced to drive around for two hours -- when the training was happening -- before being robbed of money and jewellery.

But inconsistencies in his complaint raised suspicions, and officers quickly discovered that security video footage from Somalia's home did-