

SPORT

Cup playoff one win away

AUSTRALIA opened up a commanding 2-0 lead over Taiwan on the first day of their Davis Cup Asia-Oceania Group One playoff in Kaohsiung last night.

World No.22 Lleyton Hewitt cruised to a 6-4 6-0 6-3 victory over Ti Chen, an opponent ranked 248 places lower, in the opening singles rubber.

Big-serving Chris Guccione then came out and made it a perfect start

for the Aussies, though he had to work for it, eventually seeing off Taiwan's No.1 Yen-Hsun Lu 7-6 (7-5) 6-4 7-6 (11-9).

Ranked 86, 22 places above his opponent, Guccione staved off a set point in the third set with a big kicking second serve.

The two wins moved Australia into complete control of the tie heading into today's doubles rubber, where Hewitt will team up with Paul

Hanley against Yen-Hsun Lu and Yeu-Tzuoo Wang.

Hewitt overcame some early and late resistance from Chen to give Australia the early lead, improving his overall Davis Cup singles record to 31-8.

The former world No.1 took control late in the first set after Chen had made a competitive start, but the local hope lost 10 straight games as Hewitt surged to a 3-0 advantage

in the third. Chen rallied briefly to trail Hewitt 3-4 on serve but the Australian quickly re-asserted his supremacy by breaking again and closing out the match.

Hewitt said he hadn't known much about his opponent and early in the game found it tougher to hold his own serve than break Chen's.

"He's got nothing to lose out there, he was just going for his shots and some of them were coming off,"

Hewitt said. "He served well on some points as well and then I got on top of him and I felt like I could dictate play and do what I wanted to do out there."

Relegated from the World Group for just the second time, Australia must win this tie to advance to a second-round Asia-Oceania playoff against either Thailand or Kazakhstan in Townsville in April.

- AAP, Sydney

French rips up track

VICTORIAN Mark French produced two world-class times yesterday to continue his outstanding form at these Australian track cycling championships.

French was first wheel in the team sprint and led Victoria to the fastest qualifying time and then the win in the gold medal ride against WA.

Despite feeling tired after his sprint gold medal on Thursday night, French rode 17.697 in qualifying and another personal-best time of 17.633 in the final.

National track coach Martin Barras also wants to look at French for the second-wheel position in the build-up to next month's world titles and then the Beijing Olympics.

French was second behind ACT rider Daniel Ellis on Tuesday in the one-lap time trial.

"There's no doubt he presents a very, very viable option for first wheel, both him and Ellis, there's no denying that," Barras said.

"The options with French in second wheel remain to be tested, that's a gut feeling I have.

French, Shane Perkins and Shane Kelly were too strong for the WA trio of Jason Holloway, Ryan Bayley and Scott Sunderland in the final.

Victoria clocked 44.878sec and WA rode 45.621, while the ACT was third.

The women's sprint was straightforward last night, with NSW rider Kaarle McCulloch winning her first senior national title in the event. McCulloch beat Queensland's Kerrie Meares 2-1 in the final.



In the sprint: Mark French (from left) and Shane Kelly streak to the line to win the final of the men's team sprint last night.

IN BRIEF...

Under-18s prepare

CAIRNS: AFL Cairns' under-18 squad will fine tune its preparations for country championships with a match against South Cairns today. The Cairns side demolished Townsville's under-18s last week but coach Eddie Skiba said he expected a much tougher contest against the Cutters outfit at Watsons Oval yesterday. The under-18s will be without four key personnel for the match, including Manunda Hawks big man Clint Maltby. Kick off is 4pm.

Dodge on track

GEELONG: Cairns pair Lydon Dodge and Thomas Janusz were both pleased with events despite experiencing testing days during qualifying at the 2008 Victoria Sprint Kart Championships yesterday. In wet weather, Dodge qualified 21st of 56 drivers in the clubman light class while Janusz will line up in the back half of the super heavy class field. Heats in both classes start today with finals tomorrow.

Premier proposal

SYDNEY: Football Federation Australia is keeping its options open to the possibility of hosting English Premier League games. England's top 20 clubs have all agreed to examine a Premier League proposal to play an "international round" of matches from the 2010-11 season. Five overseas venues would each host two games over a weekend in January as part of the move, with the round to be staged in addition to the 38 home and away matches currently played. Cities would bid for the right to host games.

Love returns

BRISBANE: As one Queensland cricket legend prepares to bring down the curtain on his career, another steps back into the spotlight for the Bulls next week. Queensland yesterday named its all-time leading runscorer Martin Love to play in the Pura Cup match against Western Australia, starting on Monday at the Gabba. It will be just the second first-class match this season for the 33-year-old, after completing a lengthy return from a knee reconstruction.

Grab for Gilly

SYDNEY: ADAM Gilchrist has quickly become the centre of a private bidding war in the Indian Premier League with even Sourav Ganguly chasing his signature. Bollywood megastar Shahrukh Khan, who is considered India's equivalent of Russell Crowe, bought the Kolkata franchise - one of eight for sale - for more than \$485 million last Friday. This week he told former Indian captain Ganguly, who will skipper the Kolkata team, to try to personally sign up Gilchrist and allow him to share in the riches on offer.

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Thunder open season with toughest clash

CAIRNS Thunder coach Matthew Weldon is suffering from selection headaches, and glad about it.

Weldon yesterday released his 22-man team for today's Queensland Country Rugby Union Championships season opener against defending premiers the Gold Coast.

Weldon said the strength of the squad was reflected in the standard of players on the bench and the depth of talent outside the 22.

"We've got a lot of experience right across the board," he said.

Craig Ross

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"Even in the reserves we have someone like Levi Ziegelbauer who has played for Cairns on and off since 1999 and can cover every position in the backline.

"We also have Allan Chatfield (starting at fly-half) back in Cairns after having played at a high level for Sunnybank in Brisbane.

The bench for today's clash also features three of last year's form

players of the competition, prop Mark Fryer, flanker Kevin Casey and fullback Dexter Everingham in addition to Thunder regulars Dan Hanna and Joseph Webb.

The team leaves Cairns at 6am today and Weldon is aware of the challenge of keeping his players fresh for the 4pm match.

"We realise it's not going to be an easy game, it's going to be a hard game for the whole 80 minutes.

"We must play mistake-free rugby against the Gold Coast because eve-

ry mistake you make against them they make you pay.

The Thunder starting side boasts a formidable pack, including captain and No.8 Mitch Francis, flanker Tane Russell, locks Stephen Mulqueen and Fergus McConnell, hooker Jordan Massey and prop Ben Stuart. The Thunder's first home game is next Saturday.

Cairns Thunder: 1 Michael Stanton, 2 Jordan Massey, 3 Ben Stuart, 4 Fergus McConnell, 5 Stephen Mulqueen, 6 Tane Russell, 7 Ryan Stove, 8 Mitch Francis, 9 Dane Murphy, 10 Allan Chatfield, 11 Joel Camp, 12 Lee Boylan, 13 Khaledi Dagei, 14 Joel Sykes, 15 Mark Gurnum. Reserves: 16 Mark Fryer, 17 Kevin Casey, 18 Michael Dewhurst, 19 Dan Hanna, 20 Levi Ziegelbauer, 21 Dexter Everingham, 22 Joseph Webb.