



AP PHOTO

Martina Hingis hits a shot during her match against Maria Vento-Kabchi at the Mondial Australian Women's Hardcourts Championships on Monday. Hingis won 6-2, 6-1.

TENNIS

GOLD COAST, Australia

Hingis makes statement in return from injuries

Martina Hingis, playing professional tennis for the first time in three years, made a confident return from retirement Monday.

Hingis got past some early jitters, then beat Venezuela's Maria Vento-Kabchi 6-2, 6-1 in the first round of the Australian women's hardcourt championship.

"I don't know what else I should have done today better than what I did," she said. "The score says it all."

Hingis was forced to leave tennis because of foot and ankle injuries. Now, she is far removed from her No. 1 ranking and that 1997 season when she won three majors.

She began unevenly, with the players exchanging service breaks. After that, her opponent won only two more games. Hingis rated herself favorably.

"Under the circumstances in the heat and not having played for three years, I'd say an eight (out of 10), other times even better," she said.

PERTH, Australia

Serbia-Montenegro, Netherlands win matches

Peter Wessels beat former French Open champion Gaston Gaudio of Argentina 6-2, 7-6 (5) to give the Netherlands a 2-1 victory Monday in the Hopman Cup matches.

Earlier in the event for men and women, Michaela Krajicek gave the Dutch a 1-0 lead with a 6-4, 6-2 win against Gisela Dulko. Then Gaudio and Wessels 4-6, 6-3, and 10-5 in a match tiebreaker to give Argentina its only win.

Serbia-Montenegro beat Sweden 2-1 to even its record at 1-1 after losing to the United States on Sunday. Ana Ivanovic and Novak Djokovic beat Thomas Johansson and Sofia Arvidsson 6-2, 6-4 in the decisive mixed doubles match.

BASKETBALL

NEW YORK

Pittsburgh enters top 25; Arizona returns to poll

Another great start by Pittsburgh has the Panthers in the top 25. A great weekend by Arizona has the Wildcats ranked again.

Pittsburgh, off to a third undefeated run in as many seasons, moved into The Associated Press men's basketball poll at No. 22 on Monday.

Arizona, which swept its Pac-10 weekend in Washington, returned to the rankings at No. 21 after a two-week absence that broke the longest regular-season run in poll history.

Duke (12-0) stayed No. 1 for the ninth straight week, with Connecticut and Villanova remaining second and third for the fourth straight poll. Memphis, Florida and Illinois held the fourth through sixth spots for a third straight week.

Indiana, ranked No. 17 in last week's poll, moved up to No. 16 this week.

In the AP women's poll, Tennessee remained at No. 1 for the fifth straight week on after defeating two more ranked opponents, the 101st time Tennessee has been No. 1.

FOOTBALL

CORAL GABLES, Fla.

Miami cleans house after embarrassing bowl loss

Miami fired four assistant coaches Monday, three days after the Hurricanes' season ended with a humbling 40-3 loss to LSU in the Peach Bowl, the biggest bowl defeat in the program's history.

Offensive line coach Art Kehoe, who coached on all five of the school's national championship teams, was fired, along with offensive coordinator Dan Werner, linebackers coach Vernon Hargreaves and running backs coach Don Soldingier.

"The decision was mine. Mine alone," said coach Larry Coker, who added the Peach Bowl result wasn't the only reason for the dismissals.

Four more coaches lose jobs

The Associated Press

NEW YORK

Minnesota Vikings coach Mike Tice was fired about an hour after his team ended its season Sunday.

Some other NFL coaches were given just a little more time before their teams let them go.

Four coaches — Dom Capers of the Houston Texans, Jim Haslett of the New Orleans Saints, Mike Martz of the St. Louis Rams and Mike Sherman of the Green Bay Packers — were fired Monday after disappointing seasons.

None of the firings was unexpected. And the timing of Monday's firings wasn't questioned as much as it was in Tice's case.

After defending his decision to fire Tice so soon after Minnesota's season finale, Vikings owner Zygi Wilf vowed Monday to pick a replacement quickly.

Some were upset by the timing of Wilf's announcement, made less than an hour after a meaningless victory against the Chicago Bears with the majority of players and coaches already departed from the stadium.

But the move was met with little, if any, surprise following a 9-7 finish marked by inconsistency

on the field and scandalous incidents off of it.

"There is no easy way, or a good time, to let someone know that their contract will not be renewed," Wilf said. "We didn't want him to twist in the wind another night."

Wilf said his mind was not made up until the Vikings were eliminated from playoff contention. After six straight wins to salvage a 2-5 start, they lost at home to Pittsburgh on Dec. 18 and at Baltimore on Dec. 25 to seal their fate.

Failures on the field are why Tice is out. Not, according to the boss, because of the ticket-scalping caper, that infamous by-week boat party or any of the other off-field embarrassments that occurred during his four-year tenure.

Wilf also was asked if Tice's low approval rating from fans factored in, with the Vikings seeking public support for a new stadium.

"Not at all," Wilf said.

Players blamed themselves for their coach's departure.

"We can go out and win," tight end Jermaine Wiggins said. "We've just got to do it consistently."

Here's a look at the coaches fired Monday:

HOUSTON

Worst record gets Capers fired

Dom Capers was fired as coach of the Houston Texans on Monday, one day after the team finished with the league's worst record.

Owner Bob McNair made the announcement several hours after Capers told the players at a morning meeting that he had been let go.

The Texans, who hired former NFL coach Dan Reeves as a consultant last month, will keep general manager Charley Casserly.

"We want to see improvement every year. That didn't happen this year," McNair said. "I thought it was in the best interest of the team to let Dom Capers go."

Houston's season ended Sunday with a 20-17 overtime loss in San Francisco that left the Texans with a 2-14 record, the worst in the team's four-season history.

Capers had one year remaining on a five-year contract worth \$9.5 million.

"Our responsibility was to win football games, and we made good strides the first three seasons, but we didn't get it done this year," Capers said. "I'm disappointed that things had to end this way."

The firing marks the second time the 55-year-old Capers has been released from an expansion team in its fourth season. He was let go by the Carolina Panthers in 1998.

His plan for building the team worked well until this season. The Texans won seven games last season after winning five in 2003 and four in their first season. Houston stunned Dallas in the franchise's first game in 2002.

"It was emotional; it was difficult," offensive lineman Steve McKinney said of the morning meeting. "I felt sorry for him."

Veteran defensive end Gary Walker said he is sad to see Capers go, but he isn't worried about the future of his former coach.

"Dom will have another job within a month," Walker said. "He'll be a defensive coordinator somewhere."



CAPERS

SAN ANTONIO

Saints' woes result in change

The Saints fired coach Jim Haslett on Monday, the day after ending a 3-13 season overshadowed by the hurricane that devastated New Orleans and forced the team to abandon the city.

General manager Mickey Loomis said he took into consideration all the problems the team faced after Hurricane Katrina blasted New Orleans on Aug. 29.

"I think Jim performed really well under some adverse conditions, unprecedented conditions," Loomis said. "But unfortunately we haven't had the results the past five seasons that you come to expect in this league. It wasn't based just on this season."

Haslett, 50, wasn't at the news conference but issued a statement through the team.

"There were some unexpected challenges, but in any case our record isn't good enough," he said.

Loomis said the team will pay the remaining year of Haslett's contract, worth \$3.2 million. He said he has some people in mind to be the next coach but wouldn't mention candidates by name. Interviews could begin in the next few days, he said.

Haslett, the 2000 NFL Coach of the Year in his first season after leading the Saints to the only playoff victory in team history, had one year left on his contract.

He was 45-51 in six seasons with New Orleans and had the second-most victories in team history behind Jim Mora's 93.

New Orleans hasn't had a winning season since 2002, and this year was marred before it even began. The Saints were forced from their city when Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, moving their training camp to San Antonio, then playing four home games in Baton Rouge, La., three in San Antonio and one in New Jersey.

New Orleans opened the season with an emotional win at Carolina but lost 11 of 12, including Sunday's season-ending 27-13 defeat at Tampa Bay.



Jennifer Torgerson of Brookings, S.D., expresses support for Minnesota Vikings head coach Mike Tice during

Sunday's game against the Chicago Bears in Minneapolis. Tice was fired after the Vikings won 34-10.

ST. LOUIS

Martz was at odds with Rams

Mike Martz was fired as coach of the St. Louis Rams on Monday after a 6-10 season in which he missed the final 11 games because of a heart ailment and often clashed with the front office.

The Rams started the season 2-3 before Martz was sidelined with an infection of the heart lining. Assistant Joe Vitt replaced him for the rest of the season, which ended Sunday with a win against Dallas on Sunday night.

Team president John Shaw said he hoped to hire a new coach in three or four weeks. He said the team asked permission to speak to Bears defensive coordinator Ron Rivera.

Shaw said he did not anticipate interviewing Vitt for the job and said no college coaches were on his list.

Shaw said he hopes to meet with Martz's agent, Bob LaMonte, in the next few days to discuss a possible settlement to the final year of Martz's contract.

"I guess there was a sense of expectation that it was going to happen," Shaw said of Martz's reaction. "He was very cordial."

The 54-year-old Martz coached the Rams for more than five seasons, leading them to the playoffs four times and to the Super Bowl after the 2001 season. The Rams lost the title game to New England.

Martz was 56-36, including the postseason, when he took his medical leave. He announced late in the season he had recovered and was ready to return to coaching. He made several appearances at Rams Park but was not allowed back on the sidelines.

This season, St. Louis missed the playoffs for just the second time since Martz took over. The other time was 2002, when the Rams finished 7-9.

Martz was under contract through 2006, when he was scheduled to earn \$3.25 million. But he was at odds with Jay Zygmont, director of football operations, and Charley Arment, the general manager, all season.



MARTZ



HASLETT

• Dungy

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Dungy plans to conduct two short days of practice Wednesday and Thursday.

"We'll work on the fundamentals," he said. "It can be counterproductive to prepare for a specific team when you don't know who you're going to play."

The coaches, however, will work all five days this week. The Colts have the advantage of having played and defeated the Patriots, Jaguars and Steelers this season.

"We'll probably take one day and work on the three teams we have a chance to play," Dungy said. "We'll do preparation and advance stuff, but it's not like we're starting brand new."

When next week rolls around, Dungy plans to treat the preparation the same as any other game week.

"Every game you play is important, so you prepare the same way," he said. "You don't treat a

game differently whether it's the preseason or the Super Bowl.

"If your preparation was good enough in October, it should be the same way in January."

Dungy said Indianapolis' coaches also will take time for some self-analysis and critiquing that they haven't had time for since their most recent regular-season bye week on Oct. 30.

"Otherwise, we'll enjoy the games like a fan this weekend and go from there on Sunday night when we find out who we'll play," he said.

Dungy casts his votes

Dungy revealed that he voted for Chicago's Lovie Smith as the NFL's Coach of the Year.

Dungy, Smith, Cincinnati's Marvin Lewis, New England's Bill Belichick and Seattle's Mike Holmgren are considered the top candidates for the honor.

"To have your No. 1 draft choice hold out and not get as much from him as you'd hoped, and to have your starting quarterback hurt in the preseason,

• Rest

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

June and Bob Sanders, didn't play at all, and Dwight Freeney was in for only a few plays each week.

That tactic has had mixed results in the past. Last year, the Philadelphia Eagles rested most of their key players during the final few regular-season games and still won the NFC title. In 1996, though, Denver benched most of its starters for the final three games, then lost to Jacksonville in the divisional round of the playoffs.

But the Colts are hoping the short-term absences of some starters will produce long-term gains.

Dungy said Monday most of the injured Colts likely could have played against Arizona if the Colts were still trying to clinch the AFC South title or home-field advantage.

"Corey (Simon) is probably the only guy who has not come along as quickly as we had hoped," Dungy said.

Simon, a former Pro Bowl defensive tackle and the Colts' key run stuffer, has missed the last three games with a sprained left foot although Dungy thinks he could return for the Colts first playoff game Jan. 14 or 15.

The only other significant injury was to starting right tackle Ryan Diem, who sprained a ligament in his left knee against San Diego and has not played since. The Colts are hoping Diem returns for the playoffs.

and still be the No. 2 seed, that's a tremendous job," Dungy said.

Dungy referred to Bears rookie running back Cedric Benson, who was expected to be an immediate starter but had little impact, and quarterback Rex Grossman, a Bloomington native who has been frequently injured for Chicago before recently returning to the starting lineup.

Dungy said he was unaware of whether he could vote for himself, but said he wouldn't have.

He did play favorites, however, with his NFL Most Valuable Player vote.

"I voted for Peyton (Manning)," he said. "We had the best record in football, and he does so much in terms of getting our offense where it needs to be and out on the field."

Seattle running back Shaun Alexander is considered one of the favorites for the award. Dungy said he expected Alexander and Kansas City's Larry Johnson also to receive support.

"But neither of those guys played for me, so," Dungy added with a chuckle.

Otherwise, most of the injured players are healthy.

One way the Colts tried to keep players healthy and in sync was to let starters take most of their usual work in practice.

Dungy said he believes that helps keep timing sharp and avoid any potential rustiness when they start playing meaningful games again.

And Dungy has little doubt that the Colts, who have been to the playoffs six times in seven years, have enough experience to avoid any potential pitfalls.

"You always want to be in situations where you're playing highly competitive games. That's probably the thing we'll miss," Dungy said. "But we had a good stretch where we had to do that, and got it done. I think we'll be able to get our sharpness back."

To repeat, Patriots need four victories

By JIMMY GOLEN

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FOXBOROUGH, Mass.

The New England Patriots worked it out so they could play Jacksonville in the first round of the NFL playoffs.

What the defending Super Bowl champions couldn't do this year is get the week off.

For the first time in their developing dynasty, the Patriots (10-6) will be playing on wild-card weekend, on Saturday night against the Jacksonville Jaguars (12-4).

That means they'll have to win three games just to get back to the Super Bowl and four if they're going to claim their fourth NFL title in five years.

"Obviously, you'd always want to have the bye. That's what you play for," linebacker Mike Vrabel said after the Patriots lost their regular-season finale to the Miami Dolphins, 28-26. "We didn't get that. We won our division.

"It would have been good to

end up on a positive note. All that aside, we still have a great opportunity in front of us."

The AFC East champions won Super Bowls in 2002, 2004 and 2005 after winning the division and earning a bye through the first round of the playoffs; they missed the 2003 playoffs.

"We've got the same amount of time that Jacksonville has to prepare for the game, so we're on a level field there. We just have to do a better job," coach Bill Belichick said Monday.

With a playoff berth locked up but no chance for the bye, New England did its best to rest up in the regular-season finale.

A loss left the Patriots, who had already clinched the AFC East title, with the No. 4 seed in the conference; Jacksonville was the fifth seed.

The Cincinnati Bengals, who would have played the Jaguars if New England had won, also rested in their finale and lost 37-3 to the Kansas City Chiefs.



Miami Dolphins running back Ricky Williams, left, stiff-arms New England Patriots cornerback Hank Poteat during Saturday's game in Foxborough, Mass.