

SPAIN'S Real Sociedad has retained the top spot for the 7th straight week.
— PAGE 15



SPORTS



U.S. PRESIDENT George W. Bush is honoring NASCAR champion Tony Stewart.
— PAGE 15

Niners start strong, hold off Seahawks

Team's 1st victory in 3 weeks extends its NFC West lead to 3 games

By Dennis Georgatos
San Jose Mercury News

SAN FRANCISCO — A strange thing happened to the San Francisco 49ers on the way to their most convincing win of the season Sunday. They almost lost. Leading by 21 points in the fourth quarter, the 49ers needed Rashad Holman's interception with 1:23 remaining to secure a 31-24 victory over the Seattle Seahawks.

The victory, the first in three weeks for the 49ers (8-4), extended their NFC West lead to three games with four to play. A victory at Dallas next Sunday, coupled with a St. Louis loss at Kansas City, would give the 49ers their first division title since 1997.

"We're just going to keep trying to punch those 'W's. That's the most important thing right now," said defensive tackle Jim Flanigan, who started for the flu-stricken Dana Stubblefield. "I don't think we're going to spend too much time worrying



SAN FRANCISCO 49ers cornerback Rashad Holman (right) is congratulated by Derek Smith after intercepting a pass late in the fourth quarter against the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday. The interception ended Seattle's last drive and any hopes of tying the game, which San Francisco won 31-24.

about how many yards they got on us in the fourth quarter or anything like that." For the record, the Seahawks got 212 yards on the 49ers in the fourth quarter. They also got close to creating another late-

game nightmare for the 49ers, who have blown fourth-quarter leads of 11 and 10 points in losses to New Orleans and San Diego. "It's definitely scary whenever you have a chance of letting one get away," said tackle Scott Gragg.

"Giving up a 21-point lead ... that's something we should be building on instead of looking to hold on," 49ers quarterback Jeff Garcia said. "Right now, I think teams do feel like they have a chance, even though they are

behind, just because of the way we've played the fourth quarter offensively. We haven't completed games."

The defense was most obviously at fault. It gave up a season-high 507 yards, including 427 yards and three touchdown passes by quarterback Matt Hasselbeck. The Seahawks were at the San Francisco 43 when Holman stepped in front of the last of Hasselbeck's 55 passes. "Heck, we had a chance," Seahawks Coach Mike Holmgren said. "In the end, we made too many mistakes to beat a good team like the 49ers, starting with the opening kickoff... Bottom line, we were just too sloppy."

From the opening kick, Seattle showed how it got to be 4-8. The kick was headed out of bounds, but James Williams caught the ball and headed out of bounds with it at the 3. The Seahawks' first play was a two-yard loss to the 1. Before they ran a second play, the Seahawks needed to burn a timeout.

Still, it was a scoreless first quarter, and the bumbling visitors took a 3-0 lead early in the second. The 49ers answered that field goal with a touchdown, and Jimmy Williams' 89-yard punt return three minutes later made

See **FOOTBALL**, Page 15



NEW YORK Rangers Pavel Bure (left) puts the puck past Tampa Bay Lightning goalie Nikolai Khabibulin and Dan Boyle during the second period Sunday.

Bure keeps team in playoff picture

Reuters

NEW YORK— Pavel Bure scored a pair of goals as the New York Rangers moved into the eighth and final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference with a 4-3 win over the Tampa Bay

Lightning in National Hockey League action Sunday.

Petr Nedved added a goal and two assists for New York (10-11-4-0), who moved one point up on Montreal in the overall Eastern Conference standings.

Ronald Petrovicky scored the

See **HOCKEY**, Page 15

Yeltsin says he was Russia's Davis Cup good luck charm

The former president joins the celebrations as Russia wins prize

By Robert Woodward
Reuters

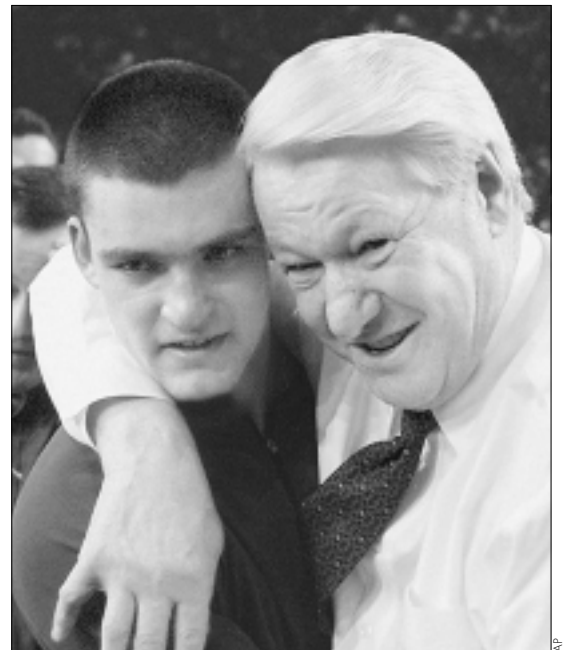
PARIS — Every team needs a mascot and Boris Yeltsin is convinced he was Russia's good luck charm at the Davis Cup final.

Within seconds of Mikhail Youzhny winning the deciding singles, Yeltsin was clambering with difficulty over a court-side barrier and marching on to the claycourt.

A couple of security guards thought about stopping him but the 71-year-old former president had come a long way, and waited a long time, for this moment of triumph and he was going to be part of it.

The first to receive a bear hug was Shamil Tarpishev, team captain since 1997, whose brave decision to play the 20-year-old Youzhny instead of former world number one Yevgeny Kafelnikov proved to be one of the great

See **TENNIS**, Page 15



RUSSIA'S Mikhail Youzhny (left) and former President Boris Yeltsin celebrate the country's victory in the Davis Cup final against France on Sunday. Russia won its first Davis Cup.