

# Top four in the last four again

MELBOURNE, Jan 27: Monica Seles, the top seed and defending champion, will put her 19-match Australian winning streak on the line against third-seeded Gabriela Sabatini of Argentina, while No 2 Steffi Graf of Germany tries to use her forehand power to beat speedy Arantxa Sanchez Vicario of Spain, the fourth seed.

They took 12 of the 16 semifinal spots at the top four events last year, and they will be facing off again Thursday at the Australian Open, where they're the top four seeds.

Monte Seles, the top seed and defending champion, will put her 19-match Australian winning streak on the line against third-seeded Gabriela Sabatini of Argentina, while No 2 Steffi Graf of Germany tries to use her forehand power to beat speedy Arantxa Sanchez Vicario of Spain, the fourth seed.

All four had tough times in their quarterfinal matches Tuesday.

The graceful Sabatini had to fight off three match points to down 10th seeded Mary Pierce of France in a three-set match that lasted nearly three hours and didn't end until 1:45 am.

A hoarse Sabatini called her comeback one of the best of her career. But while Pierce certainly had sting in her shots, Sabatini knows that Seles' two-fisted blasts and ability to concentrate will be even tougher.

"I'm really looking forward to this match," Sabatini said. "I feel I'm ready to play against Monica. I'm going to have to be pretty aggressive and just try to fight each point because that's how she plays."

Seles leads 8-3 in their head-to-head meetings and has won the last three straight, although she needed three sets in one match and a tiebreaker in another.

The Yugoslav-born Florida resident surpassed \$10 million in career earnings with her three-set victory over unseeded Julie Haldor of France in the quarterfinals, a match that showed an attacking style can pressure Seles.

But the ability to raise her game when necessary, demonstrated by her remarkable seven straight final appearances in Grand Slams, is the intangible that has taken Seles to the top and kept her there.

Although the oddsmakers have installed her as the strong favorite here, she says the players ranked below her are improving and providing constant pressure.

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Gabriela Sabatini of Argentina shows her strength during her match against Mary Pierce of France at the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. Sabatini won 4-6, 7-6 (14-12), 6-0.

—AFP photo

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Graf wore down seventh-seeded Jennifer Capriati in the quarterfinals with a barrage of groundstrokes that had the 16-year-old American running from side to side. She can't be sure that will happen against Sanchez Vicario, who seems

particularly Sweden's Lars Wallgren, has prepared her for the female heavy hitters.

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Sanchez Vicario, who like Graf had to come back from down a service break in both sets against fifth-seeded Mary

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