

Graf, Fernandez in French Open final

PARIS, June 4: Mary Joe Fernandez and Steffi Graf breezed through their respective semifinals for the combined loss of only six games on Thursday to set up a title clash in Saturday's French Open final, reports Reuter.

Fernandez was a surprise 6-2, 6-2 winner against Spain's Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario while Graf made sure of regaining her old status at the top of the world rankings with a 6-1, 6-1 thrashing of German compatriot Anke Huber.

In the absence of Monica Seles, still recovering from a knife attack at the end of April, Graf and Sanchez-Vicario were expected to clash in the Roland Garros final, but Fernandez upset most predictions against the strangely timid Spaniard.

It will be the Americans third Grand Slam final compared with Graf's 19th, and she has got there the hard way having outlasted world number five Gabriela Sabatini 10-8 in the third set of their quarter final.

"I was a bit tired yesterday after my match with Gaby but I had a good rest," said Fernandez, still only 21. "I knew I had to attack from the start and that's just what I did. I'm very excited to be in the final."

Graf was understandably happier to talk about reaching the final rather than dwell on her rather hollow elevation to the world number one spot as Seles recovers from her attack by a Graf supporter.

"I'm in the final of a Grand Slam tournament, that's what matters to me," she said. "It doesn't matter what ranking I've got."

Neither Sanchez Vicario, the 1989 champion, nor Huber produced anything like their best tennis, ensuring the two semifinals barely lasted two hours in total.

Fernandez admitted her extraordinary 3-1/2 hour struggle against Sabatini, in which she saved five match points, had been something of a psychological breakthrough.

"Coming back from 5-1 down doesn't happen very often and it gives you confidence," she admitted. "Over the last 15 months, I've seen that being more aggressive is the way to go."

Sanchez-Vicario has scampered around the clay courts of Europe with significant results recently, beating Graf in the final in Hamburg only last month, but on this occasion looked leaden and tentative.

When she fought back from 2-0 down in the second set to 2-2 it seemed she was about to wake from her reverie but, sadly for her supporters, it was not to be.

Fernandez even had time to regather her composure in the first set after an extraordinary

interlude when the players were reduced to just one ball, as if they were playing on a public court on a windy day.

The missing balls were eventually retrieved from under one of the stands and Fernandez, who dropped her serve amid the confusion, made sure Sanchez-Vicario could also find no hiding place.

The 18 year old Huber, in her first Grand Slam semifinal,



GRAF... NO 1 AGAIN

managed only 11 points in the entire first set and attracted her compatriot's sympathy once the final ball had been struck.

"At times I felt sad for her because she didn't know how to get back into the match," Graf said. "I knew I had the right game to beat her but it was her first in a semifinal and she was probably a little bit nervous."

Graf has not been number one on the women's tour computer since September 1991 and her return to the top when the next official rankings are released next week will end a 91-week stretch of Seles domination.

The main satisfaction for the 23 year-old Graf, remarkably the oldest player in either the men's or women's semifinal line-up, is that her form in Paris has not been affected by her shock over the Seles affair.

This will be her sixth Roland Garros final in seven years, although she has not captured the title on the red Parisian clay since 1988.

Looking ahead to the Fernandez match, she expects a tougher test than her 10-0 record against the American suggests.

"She's showing a lot more confidence and has definitely improved over the past half-year or so," said Graf. "She's shown a lot more aggression and toughness in the last two months."

"I can beat anyone," Fernandez said last week. "It's just matter of believing in yourself and having the faith that when you get to the big matches, to win the last couple of games."

That faith was displayed vividly in her comeback from a 1-6, 1-5 deficit against Sabatini. Fernandez watched replays later on TV and was inspired.

"I found myself getting more nervous watching myself play than actually when I was there," she said Thursday. "It showed me the way that I should be playing, and what it takes to win those matches."

Fernandez's only previous Grand Slam final were two losses at the Australian Open.

Fernandez has been ranked in the top 10 since 1989, yet she often fell short in big matches and rarely beat the top players. Now, after 18 months of coaching by Harold Solomon, she is training harder and hitting harder.

"I have played a defensive game all my life. Since I was a little girl I was taught to hit the ball back and not make any mistakes," she said Thursday. "It takes a while to change that."

Solomon said he initially thought Fernandez would be ready to challenge for Grand Slam titles by 1995. But after she beat Sabatini, he said, "I told her, 'You're ready now.'"

Two weeks ago, at the German Open, Fernandez put up her toughest fight against Graf, winning a set for the first time. Graf testified to Fernandez's improvement.

"She never went the last step... she never had the confidence of winning one of the big tournaments," Graf said. "But for the last few weeks, she has shown a lot more eagerness and toughness on the court."

Tell-tales of top two

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Personal: Born in Bruchl on 14 June, 1969. 1.75 metres tall. Started playing at age four, turned professional in October 1982. Managed by her father Peter who saved off a racket handle to allow her to start playing. Younger brother Peter is a Formula Three racing driver. Loves animals and owns four dogs. Enjoys music, art and photography. Has a Youth Tennis Centre in Leipzig, Germany.

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Steffi Graf: Age 23. Seeded: One. Career prize-money: 11.27 million dollars. Titles: 11 Grand Slam, 72 overall. Coach: Heinz Gunthardt, former Swiss Davis Cup player. Grand Slam record: Winner 1987 and 1988 French Open, 1988, 1989 and 1990 Australian Open, 1988, 1989, 1991 and 1992 Wimbledon and 1988 and 1989 US Open. Path to final: Beat Cecilia Dahlman (Sweden) 7-6, 6-1, Andrea Stranadova (Czech Republic) 6-1, 6-1, Laura Gildemeister (Peru) 6-2, 6-2, Iva Majoli (Croatia) 6-4, 7-6, Jennifer Capriati (US) 6-3, 7-5, Anke Huber (Germany) 6-1, 6-1. Record: First player to complete golden Grand Slam of four Grand Slam events and Olympic title in 1988. Number one ranked player for record (men or women) of 186 weeks from August 1987 to March 1991, returns to number one after the French Open for the first time since September 1991. Playing style: Right-hander with devastating forehand and a much improved backhand, which had been restricted to playing sliced shots. Used to play her matches from the baseline but varies her game more now and is prepared to go forward on occasions. Mentally tough though she has appeared to be more fragile in last few years.

Mary Joe Fernandez: Age: 21. Seeded: Five. Career prize-money: 2.76 million dollars. Titles: Three. Coach: Harold Solomon, former US clay court player. Grand Slam record: finalist 1990 and 1992 Australian Open. Path to final: Beat Nancy Feber (Belgium) 6-2, 6-3, Ann Grossmann (US) 6-2, 6-2, Brenda Schultz (Netherlands) 2-6, 7-5, 6-3, Gabriela Sabatini (Argentina) 1-6, 7-6, 10-8, Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario (Spain) 6-2, 6-2. Playing style: Right-hander with two handed backhand. A baseline player, who likes clay surfaces. Had dramatic win by attacking Sabatini in the quarter-finals after trailing 6-1, 5-1 and having five match points against her. Personal: born in the Dominican Republic on August 19, 1971. She now lives in Florida. 1.78 metres tall. Turned professional in February 1986. Father, a lawyer, was born in Spain and mother is from Cuba. Won gold medal in doubles with Gigi Fernandez (no relation) at last year's Barcelona Olympics. Was youngest player to win a match at US Open in 198