

Sport



Filipino Felix Barrientos makes a forehand return against Thai Nattapol Ploysook in the men's team tennis event in the 17th Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in Singapore on June 15. Philippines won the gold. — AFP photo

Rain or shine, Agassi's ready

HALLE, Germany, June 16: Andre Agassi is determined to start the defence of his Wimbledon title next week despite a heavy defeat in his first match for two months on Tuesday and constant injury problems, reports Reuter.

The American, playing his first serious match since April 9 because of tendinitis in his right wrist, was beaten 5-7, 6-2, 6-1, by German Carl-Uwe Steeb in the opening round of the Halle grass court tournament, his first and last test before Wimbledon.

But Agassi, who looked slightly overweight and sluggish in the 96-minute match, said there was no way he was going to miss his chance of opening the action on the All-England Centre Court next Monday.

"I would have probably gone to Wimbledon with a cast on, against the medical opinion I have had," Agassi said. "There

was no pain in the wrist today. But my elbow gave me a bit of concern."

"It is possibly a once-in-a-lifetime chance to go and defend the title and I am committed regardless."

Agassi wore a strapping on his right elbow that he injured during a 45-minute training session on Monday.

After less than three hours hitting a ball on a tennis court in the last four weeks, the American will be desperately short of match practice at the start of the sport's most prestigious tournament.

Agassi, who was forced to modify his service action to take pressure off the injuries, realises he has a major uphill task even to get through the first week at Wimbledon.

But he was just happy to be on a court against the Halle arena, a new stadium which has been modelled on the All-England Club.

"When you have had about 45 minutes practice you can't expect a lot," said Agassi, who

plans to spend a few more days on the grass courts in the German town before travelling to London at the end of the week.

"I need more matches. I wish I could have had more. But every minute I spend on a tennis court from now until Wimbledon is going to help me. If I can get through a few matches, things may go all right for me. The first week is going to be critical."

The American said his heart was in returning to Wimbledon. But on Tuesday's form he has a very long way to go to be in with a realistic chance of picking up the men's singles trophy on July 4.

German Davis Cup player Steeb plays his best tennis on clay and tends to struggle on the fast grass surface. But he was made to look good for most of the match by Agassi, who struggled with his timing and his footwork despite a positive performance in the first set.

Green Wimbledon, wan Becker

WIMBLEDON, England, June 16: If Boris Becker had visited Wimbledon earlier this week, he would have spotted a steamroller on Centre Court smoothing out last-minute lumps and bumps before the championships start on Monday, reports Reuter.

The German might have appreciated the irony. Once irresistible on grass himself, flattening everyone in, his path at Wimbledon has become more difficult than it used to be.

It is 1989 since he won the men's singles title, two-and-a-half years since he lifted a Grand Slam trophy anywhere. At 25, people are openly wondering if the force is still with him.

Yet Becker's track record at the All-England club means he will remain the key name in the men's draw when the 128 players spring into action next week.

Three times a winner, initially as a 17-year-old in 1985, his booming serve, acrobatic dives at the net and immense will to win have already guaranteed him a place in Wimbledon folklore.

All he desires now is another major title, perhaps as much to resolve the questions in his own mind as much as those of his critics.

World number one Pete Sampras and compatriot Michael Stich, both in his half of the draw, will be keen for some answers as well, but Becker often gives the impression he is the last person in a position to supply them.

In Australia in January he lost in the first round, in Paris last month he departed at the second hurdle. The experience has left him reflective but still

optimistic. "How much longer is there to go? Who knows?" he said last week. "I am at least halfway through my career, if not three-quarters, but I still believe I

champion every year since 1987, from which belies his current slump.

Even Stefan Edberg, whose Wimbledon record is barely inferior, knows the German's fortunes are likely to reflect his own. But such is his unpredictability these days his fellow German Marc Goellner is being given a real chance of upsetting him in the first round.

Part of the problem would appear to lie in his frequent decisions to change coach, most recently before the French Open when he split with Austrian Guenther Bresnik.

He has since turned to former Davis Cup colleague Eric Jelen, repeating his belief that while he knows how to hit the shots, he needs assistance in other areas.

"Eric is very good for my mind. That's more what I need than someone to teach me how to play a forehand or backhand," he said.

"I'm not always 100 per cent when I wake up in the morning, I need someone to kick my behind to get me going."

Off the court, there is also the distraction of his fiancée Barbara Feltus, a relationship which has survived cruel racist taunts back home in his native Germany.

His early departure from the French Open allowed him the luxury of extra practice on grass. Sources at Queen's Club, where he has spent much of his practice time, insist he has been hard at work and gaining in sharpness.

On Monday night he was photographed leaving a fashionable London restaurant with Barbara, wearing the most contented of smiles. The likes of Sampras and Edberg, who both tend to prefer a quiet night at home, may discover why in the next fortnight.

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