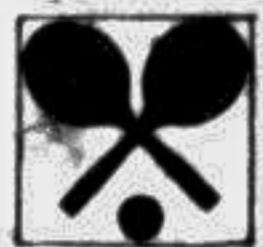


## Sport

## Navratilova era nears end



NEW YORK, Nov 14: Never mind the other 15 players at this week's Virginia Slims Championships, this year the finale of the women's tennis season will be a going-away party for Martina Navratilova, reports AFP.

"It is all going to be so sentimental, it could be overwhelming," said Navratilova, who will retire after the championships. "I really want to do well, to go out playing the way I know I can play. It would be the ultimate to go out with a win."

"But I'm also ready for it to be over with. There is so much going on inside me and around me that it's hard to deal with. It's going to be tough to say goodbye."

Navratilova, whose 167 career singles titles include 18 Grand Slams, is seeded sixth here. She plays her opening match on Tuesday against Argentina's Gabriela Sabatini.

Her old rival Chris Evert and mentor Billy Jean King will be among those in attendance when a banner bearing Navratilova's name is raised to the rafters of Madison Square Garden, and honour usually reserved for stars of the New York Knicks basketball team.

She was afraid that after watching it she'd be crying too hard to play.

Navratilova's parents will be at court side after making the trip from their home near Prague.

They have urged their 38-year-old daughter to reconsider her retirement plans, but Navratilova says she is looking forward to new challenges.

On the day after the championships she will get down to business as the new president of the Women's Tennis Association.

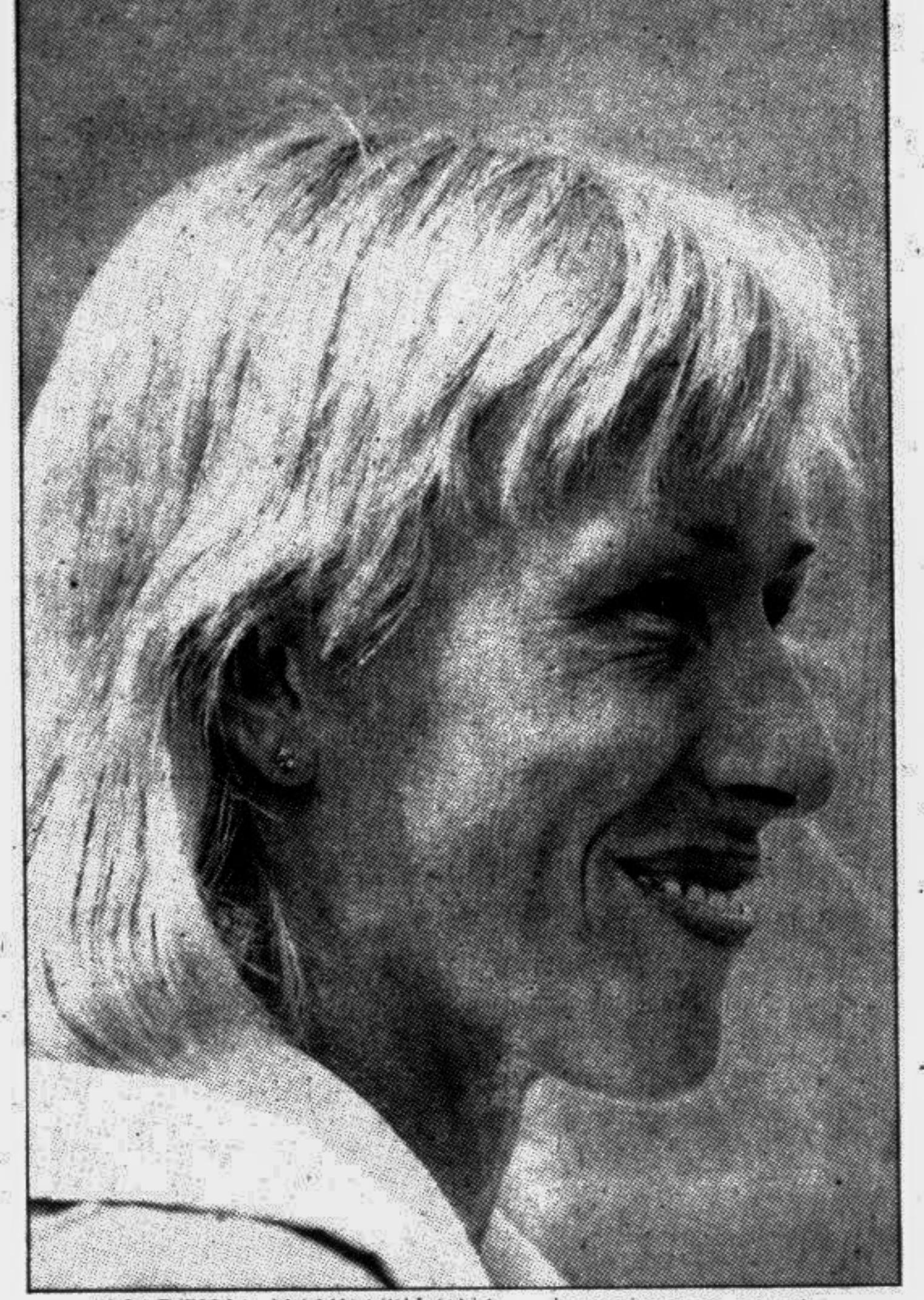
On the same day an announcement is scheduled on her participation in a legends tour with Evert and other veterans.

She already has an exhibition tour scheduled that will take her through Poland, Czech Republic, France, Italy, Brazil, Chile, Thailand and Hong Kong, and she has to start work on the second novel in her mystery trilogy: "Feat of

Clay."

First, however, she has to survive her send-off, she will be given a Harley-Davidson motorcycle as a going-away present as well as an 11-foot (three-metre) tall tennis ball signed by thousands of New York fans.

Madison Square Garden has been the scene of some of



MARTINA NAVRATILOVA ... last time on court

Navratilova's greatest successes.

She has won the women's championships here, sponsored variously by Virginia Slims and Avon, sometimes played in March and sometimes in November, a total of seven times. She has reached the final four other times, and won the doubles 11 times.

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As the years have worn on,

she has become a favourite of the vocal New York crowd.

"Playing in the Garden is a lot different than playing in the other indoor venues because the Garden is obviously very special, but it is also very big and open," said Navratilova's coach Craig Kardon. "And the crowd is always a factor."

Navratilova, who dropped out of the top five for the first time since 1975 when she fell to sixth in the world rankings last week, has won just one tournament this year, the Paris Indoors in February.

In July she was a surprise finalist at Wimbledon, where she lost to Conchita Martinez of Spain. And she played superbly in losing the Oakland, California, final to Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario on November 6.

"I had not played tennis like that in a long time," Navratilova said. "It's nice to be able to play great tennis. I just wish I could finish it off. When I play tennis like this, I know I didn't retire too late."

Now does she think she is retiring too soon. A look at 14-year-old Venus Williams, who made her professional debut in Oakland, was enough to convince Navratilova of that.

"I wish I had her legs," Navratilova said after watching Williams play. "Getting old really stinks. I miss winning easily. Everything is three sets these days. It's infuriating."

Sanchez-Vicario will be seeded second at the championships, in accordance with her world ranking.

But she has dominated the game this year, winning French Open and the US Open to close in on world number one Steffi Graf.

Graf herself had been fighting injuries and has not played since she lost to Sanchez-Vicario at Flushing Meadows.

She pulled out on last week's Virginia Slims Philadelphia with a sore and could yet miss the championships. If she does play, she will meet Brenda Schultz of the Netherlands in the first round.

The other seeded players in the fields are Martinez (3), Jana Novotna of Czech Republic (4), Mary Pierce of France (5), Lindsay Davenport of the United States (7), and Kimiko Date of Japan (8).

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The Sporting Lisbon midfielder hooked the ball past two defenders and Austrian keeper Otto Konrad for the only goal of the match.

Earlier, in the 19th minute, Portugal missed a chance to score from a penalty when Oceano Cruz hit the bar after sending Konrad diving the wrong way.

The foul that prompted the penalty set the tone for the match. The bigger Austrians, playing defensively from the start, used all means, including foul after foul to prevent their swifter opponents from getting near the goal.

By the 83rd minute when Austrian striker Peter Stroger was sent off for selling Juventus midfielder Paulo Sousa with a vicious clip on the calf from behind, Danish referee Peter Mikkelsen had handed out five yellow cards to the Austrians and two to the Portuguese.

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