

Merry, magical Pierce



MELBOURNE, Jan 28: Mary Pierce kept the ball deep and pounded from Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario's mistakes Saturday to win the Australian Open women's singles final — her first Grand Slam title, reports AP.

Pierce, the No. 4 seed, defeated top-seeded Sanchez-Vicario 6-3, 6-2 — a result that delayed Sanchez-Vicario's bid to take over the No. 1 world ranking from the injured Steffi Graf.

Pierce, 20, avenged her loss to Sanchez-Vicario in last year's French Open final and became the first Frenchwoman to win a Grand Slam singles title since Francoise Durr at the 1967 French Open and the first to win the Australian title.

"I don't think I'll ever forget this in my whole life," Pierce said. "All the hard work has really paid off and it's a great way to start my year."

"I just haven't realized what has happened yet. I'm still reeling from it."

The win over Sanchez-Vicario took Pierce one hour, 25 minutes. It was a hard-fought victory in the arguably the best women's match of the tournament.

Pierce went through the tournament without dropping a set.

Sanchez-Vicario, suffering from tendinitis in her right arm, had been aiming for her fourth Grand Slam title — but lost in the Australian Open final for the second straight year.

"Mary played a great match," said Sanchez-Vicario. "This is my second final (here), hopefully the third will be a lucky one."

Last year, the Spaniard won only two games in the final against Graf, who currently is sidelined by a calf muscle injury.

Graf has announced that she will miss next week's Toray Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo with the same injury. As a result of her withdrawal, Sanchez-Vicario will leapfrog the German and take over as No. 1 when the rankings are issued on Feb. 6.

"I don't think it's a big consolation," Sanchez-Vicario said. "That's the result of all the matches throughout the year. I worked hard to be able to get there and I'm very happy to be No. 1."

Pierce hit 22 winners to 15 from Sanchez-Vicario in the final, and also made fewer errors — 21 to 30.

The first four games of the match — all breaks of serve — lasted 24 minutes, but Pierce then surged from 2-2 to 5-2 and never relinquished her grip on the contest, winning 10 of the last 13 games.

Pierce, a loser in all five finals she contested last year, pouted and berated herself for errors, but kept calm in the crunch.

"Mentally I was very calm."



Mary Pierce of France poses with the trophy after beating Spaniard Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario in the final of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. Pierce won 6-3, 6-2.

very focussed and concentrated on every point — at the French Open I was very nervous," Pierce said. "Even when I had two match points and I was serving, I wasn't nervous (today)."

The important point for me was not to look at who was on the other side of the net. I hope I am going to be able to stay as calm as I did today throughout the whole year when it matters."

Amid the constant rumble of thunder, Pierce's powerful and deep baseline shots overwhelmed 23-year-old Sanchez-Vicario, who became increasingly erratic.

More than anything, it was Sanchez-Vicario's serve that troubled her. She held serve only twice and lost the first point of every service game.

"If I had been able to hold my serve it would have made a big difference," she said.

Reneberg and Palmer, the 13th seeds, beat Mark Knowles of the Bahamas and Canada's Daniel Nestor 6-3, 3-6, 6-3, 6-2 to provide a timely boost for their Davis Cup hopes in the first round tie against France in St. Petersburg, Fla., next weekend.

It was Reneberg's second Grand Slam doubles title. He teamed with Jim Grabb to win the US Open doubles in 1992. Palmer had not won a Grand Slam doubles crown before Saturday.

Their only previous title success as a team was at Atlanta last year.

Playing in their fourth tournament together, they came from 1-3 down in the third set to break their opponents' next two service games and take control.

In the fourth set they capitalized on some loose play to set up the win by breaking Knowles in the seventh game. Palmer, 23, completed the victory on the second match-point after having surrendered the first with a double fault.

"Things were not looking too good for a while there," the Florida-based Palmer said. "We hung in there and got a couple of breaks and things went our way. They were really on top of us at that point. I think both Richey and I felt a little run-over. But it feels great. You don't get too many chances at a Grand Slam title. For me to win my first, I'm really happy."

Reneberg, 29, was equally thrilled.

The last couple of years I haven't done that well in doubles," said Reneberg, who has concentrated on singles, in which he is ranked 53. "A lot of guys think of Jared as one of the best doubles players in the world. I feel pretty excited about playing doubles and I hope we have a good year."

Reneberg and Grabb were beaten in the 1992 Wimbledon final by John McEnroe and Michael Stich, losing the longest doubles final in Wimbledon history — five hours, one minute — by 19-17 in the fifth set.

Reneberg and Palmer shared US \$150,000 for the triumph. Knowles and Nestor split US \$175,000.

Reneberg, Palmer win doubles

MELBOURNE, Jan 28: US Davis Cup pair Richey Reneberg and Jared Palmer made an immediate impact at their first Grand Slam tournament together when they won the Australian Open men's doubles title Saturday, reports AP.

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Aussie Open men's singles final today

It's special for Sampras



MELBOURNE, Jan 28: Pete Sampras has called it his "most special" Grand Slam final.

The American's emotion-charged run at the Australian Open culminates on Sunday when he takes on countryman Andre Agassi in the final, reports AP.

It has been a tumultuous tournament for Sampras, who will join an elite group to win back-to-back Australian Open titles if he can beat the in-form Agassi.

His coach, Tim Gullikson, was forced to return to the United States midway through the year's first Grand Slam after falling ill.

Gullikson, who has suffered two strokes in recent months, left on Tuesday. That night Sampras wept openly as he came from two sets down to beat Jim Courier in a marathon quarterfinal.

The tears were for Gullikson and Sampras admitted after beating Michael Chang in



PETE SAMPRAS

the semifinals that making the final had added significance as a result.

"This is the most special for me because of the circumstances and the fact I was down and out against (Magnus) Larsson and down and out against Courier," Sampras said. "I showed more heart than I probably ever have. I have feelings like everyone else. I'm not a robot out there."

Sampras, 23, is chasing his sixth Grand Slam title and second straight Australian

Open crown.

If he can beat the second-seeded Agassi, Sampras will join Courier, Ivan Lendl, Stefan Edberg, Mats Wilander, Johan Kriek, Guillermo Vilas and Ken Rosewall as those who have successfully defended their Australian Open titles.

Agassi, 24, has had by far the easier run to the final, and the US Open champion is bidding to become the first player since Rosewall in 1971 to win the tournament without dropping a set. Bjorn Borg was the last player to do it at any Grand Slam, achieving the feat in 1980 at the French Open.

Agassi advanced to the final by winning his semifinal by default against an injured Aaron Krickstein on Friday. Agassi led 3-0 in the third set after winning the opening two when Krickstein's right groin gave in.

Agassi's coach of 10 months, Brad Gilbert, said the Las Vegas resident was playing better than when he won his second Grand Slam title at the US Open in September.

"He's serving better, playing more patiently and hitting the ball harder," said Gilbert. "His return of serve during this tournament has been incredible."

Agassi is not concerned that he has been untested so far in the tournament.

"I think the dynamics of the match on Sunday is going to bring out the best in me regardless of what happened today," Agassi said after his win over Krickstein.

"You can argue both sides, whether its good to have a tough match under your belt and then compromise your fitness, or whether it's better to get through and be fresh and ready to play."

Sunday's final is the 13th meeting between the pair, with Sampras leading 7-5.

INFOS ON FINALISTS

Thumbnail profiles of the players in Sunday's Australian Open men's singles final:

PETE SAMPRAS (United States)

Age: 23
Seeded: 1
Current World ranking: 1
Highest world ranking: 1
Career prizemoney: US \$11,813,112

Singles titles: 30
Grand Slam titles: 5
Grand Slam finals: 6
Head-to-head with Agassi: 7-5

ANDRE AGASSI (United States)

States)

Age: 24
Seeded: 2
Current world ranking: 2
Highest world ranking: 2
Career prizemoney: US \$17,700,705

Singles titles: 24
Grand Slam titles: 2
Grand Slam finals: 5
Head-to-head with Sampras: 5-7

ROAD TO FINAL

How the men's singles finalists advanced in the \$6.2 million Australian Open:

PETE SAMPRAS (i)
First round — def. Gianluca Pozzi, 6-3, 6-2, 6-0.
Second round — def. Jaeh Krosiak, 6-2, 6-0, 6-1.

Third round — def. Lars Jonsson, 6-1, 6-2, 6-4.
Fourth round — def. Magnus Larsson (15), 4-6, 6-7 (4-7), 7-5, 6-4, 6-4.

Quarterfinals — def. Jim Courier (9), 6-7 (4-7), 6-7 (3-7), 6-3, 6-4, 6-3.
Semifinals — def. Michael

Chang (5), 6-7 (6-8), 6-3, 6-4, 6-4.

ANDRE AGASSI (2)
First round — def. Grant Stafford, 6-2, 6-4, 6-2.
Second round — def. Jerome Golmard, 6-2, 6-3, 6-1.

Third round — def. Greg Rusedski, 6-2, 6-4, 6-2.
Fourth round — def. Patrick Rafter, 6-3, 6-4, 6-0.

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Susanti, Bang in Japan Open final

TOKYO, Jan 28: Susi Susanti of Indonesia, the Barcelona Olympic gold medalist, will meet South Korea's Bang Soo-Hyun in the women's singles final after beating China's Ye Zhaoying in the Japan Open badminton championships on Saturday, reports AP.

Heryanto Arbi plays Joko Suprianto in the all-Indonesian men's final, also Sunday.

Top-seeded Susanti needed 31 minutes to score an 11-5, 11-3 victory over Ye.

Bang, the second seed, downed Lin Xiao Qing of Sweden 11-3, 11-6 in just 30 minutes in the other women's semifinal.

"We met many times before and know each other. I will try to concentrate well and play my own game. It should be a close match," said Susanti of the final match.

Bang said: "I hit nice strokes today. I've lost 13 and won two in games with Susanti before. But now I have more confidence than before, as I know Indonesian players' strokes are not strong as before."

In the men's semifinal matches, Arbi, displaying powerful jumping smashes, overwhelmed world No. 1 player Ardy B Wiranata 15-6, 10-15, 15-4.

Suprianto beat erratic Alan Budi Kusuma, the Barcelona Olympic gold medalist, 15-4, 15-3, in the other men's semifinals.

"It was an easy game as Kusuma made many errors," Suprianto said.

Arbi said: "I played the stroke game in the first and second sets and I attacked him with smashes in the third set as I had planned."

Wiranata said: "I had nice play but my opponent was much better. I was exhausted."

OJ's I want to tell you

LOS ANGELES, Jan 28: OJ Simpson proclaimed his innocence in a book and audio tape that went on sale on Friday, saying he would have jumped in front of a bullet for his former wife Nicole, whom he is accused of murdering, reports Reuter.

"I want to state unequivocally that I did not commit these horrible crimes. I loved Nicole, I could never do such a thing," Simpson says at the beginning of the book "I want to tell you."

"How could anybody say I could kill this woman? How can anybody say that? Don't they understand that I'd jump in front of a bullet for Nicole? That I'd jump in front of a train to protect my family, to protect any member of Nicole's family?"

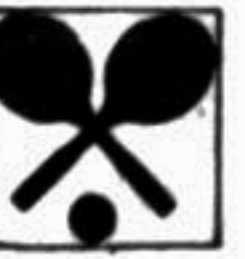
"Trust me, I never would have taken Nicole from our two little children. I would have taken myself out of their lives, not Nicole out of their lives," he adds.

The book is being published by Little, Brown and Co and sells for about 18 US dollars.

Simpson has pleaded not guilty to charges that he killed Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman on the night of June 12 outside her home in Los Angeles.

In the book Simpson says he believes the culprit will eventually be caught. "I have no doubt in my mind. It might be five years from now, it might be 10 years from now. I have no doubt."

Getting over dad syndrome



MELBOURNE, Jan 28: Mary Pierce had just won her first Grand Slam, beating Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario in the Australian Open women's final on Saturday, and out came the inevitable question about her dad, reports AP.

Pierce's father, Jim, was banned by the WTA Tour because of his disruptive behaviour during her matches. He has not been in the stands to see her play since the French Open in 1993, but the specter of his conduct remains.

She's surrounded herself with a support team led by leading coach Nick Bollettieri, ostensibly to offer her a more calming environment, although her nervous, self-critical nature on court isn't always evident of it.

But after her 6-3, 6-2 win over Sanchez-Vicario in an 85-minute match, Pierce, 20, was ready for the expected.

"I think with my dad right now things are going well and

I would like to keep it that way," Pierce said. "We have just been having it as a father-daughter relationship and not really much into my tennis. So when I am playing or when I win or when I lose or am concerned about my training, I don't have him in my thoughts."

"I am sure he probably watched and I'm sure he is probably very happy for me."

Pierce, who did not lose a set during the tournament, was savoring her moment of triumph.

"I just haven't realized what's happened yet. I'm still reeling from it," she said. "What I feel like doing now is just enjoying the victory. It's just so great. I'm sure I'm not going to forget that for the rest of my life."

Nor a lot of others, from a lot of different places. Born in Montreal, raised in Florida but playing for France because her mother is French, she spoke immediately after the match with her mother and later with Bollettieri by telephone in the United States.

"We just kind of both

laughed," Pierce said. "I told him that I was just so happy. I hadn't realized it yet. I was a little shocked. He was very happy for me and proud. He said I deserved it. It was what I have worked for and to enjoy it."

In her acceptance speech, she thanked another coach, Sven Groeneveld, and her fitness instructor, Jose Rincon, who watched in the stands. She looked up at them frequently during the match for support and approval.

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