

Sport

Graf gets into top gear

PARIS, May 30: Judging by her performance in the first round of the French Open on Monday the 25-year-old German...

Despite not having played for six weeks because of an injured back, Graf showed little signs of rust as she began her quest for a fourth French title...

Graf, bothered by a bone spur in her lower back, had given rise to rumours that she was considering retirement...

But the 25-year-old German, who has not played since winning the Houston women's Championship on April 10...

"I played well, I'm satisfied with my first match," said Graf, seeded second behind defending champion Arantxa Sanchez Vicario.

"If I had played safer in the second set it might have been easier but I felt I put the pressure on her and was always in control of the match."

So far it's been a year of highs and lows for Graf chronic back problems being only the latest in an alarming string of injuries...

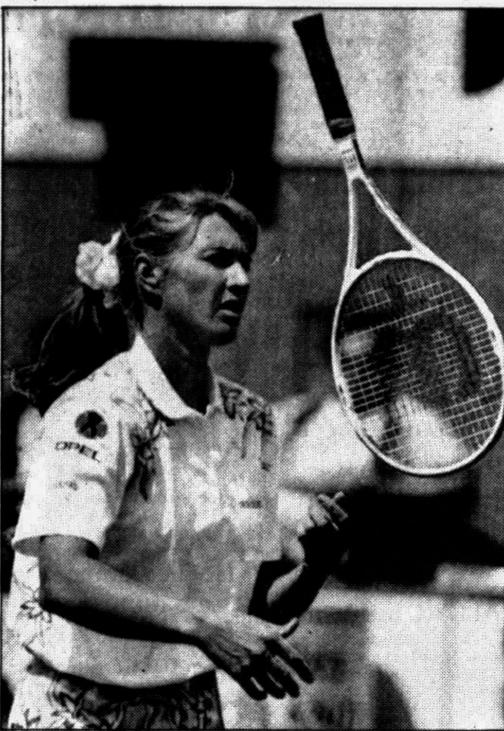
Graf's start to the season was stalled by a combination of groin and back injuries which prevented her from defending her title at the Australian Open.

By February all Graf's troubles finally seemed to be behind her as she returned to familiar devastating form...

But following her win in Houston, Graf's back problems

returned along with speculation that her career could be over. Looking for her 16th Grand Slam title, Graf put all such conjecture to rest with her strong start to the tournament...

"I practised very hard for this tournament," he said. "I felt very comfortable coming in, I feel a lot better than I did last year."



German Steffi Graf throws her racket in the air in disappointment over a lost point during her first-round match against Argentina's Ines Gorrochategui at French open in Paris on May 29. Graf won 6-1, 7-5.

— AFP/UNB photo

Soccercide!

RIO DE JANEIRO, May 30: The bullet which killed a soccer fan during a match at Rio de Janeiro's Maracana Stadium may have been a stray fired from outside the stadium...

The 32-year-old fan died after being hit during the second half of Saturday's game between Fluminense and Bangu.

He was in the upper tier of the stadium in one of the most expensive seating areas and had stood up to watch a Fluminense attack when he was hit.

The spokesman said the bullet appeared to have been fired from a heavy duty rifle and may have been a stray shot from a shanty-town on one of the hillsides which overlook the ground.

Rio shanty-towns are home to heavily-armed drug traffickers and shootouts between gangs are common. Traffickers also fire shots into the air when a new consignment of drugs arrives.

Several soccer fans have been shot dead in Brazil in the past year, some victims of stray bullets.

Europe Small Nations' Games on

LUXEMBOURG, May 30: Luxembourg, a giant among the smallest countries in Europe, launched on Monday five days of sporting events in which athletes will compete for medals they could never hope to win in bigger championships, reports Reuter.

The sixth European Small Nations Games involve 1,000 of Europe's Luxembourg, Monaco, Liechtenstein, San Marino and Andorra. Cyprus, the biggest small nation in terms of population, Malta and Iceland are also involved.

"Small countries often do not have the calibre of athletes to meet Olympic qualifications," said Norbert Haupter, president of Luxembourg's Olympic and Sports Committee.

The European Small Nations' Games give them the opportunity to compete at a top-level international event, he said.

Cyprus holds the most medals to date but Iceland has won the most gold medals since the Games started in 1985.

The Games, which are held every two years, include events in athletics, swimming, cycling, shooting, judo, volleyball, basketball, table-tennis and tennis.

ATP's top 20

PARIS, May 30: Leading ATP Tour men's singles rankings on Monday, reports Reuter.

- 1. Andre Agassi (US) 4,705 points
2. Pete Sampras (US) 3,965
3. Boris Becker (Germany) 3,265
4. Goran Ivanisevic (Croatia) 2,921
5. Thomas Muster (Austria) 2,675
6. Michael Chang (US) 2,669
7. Sergi Bruguera (Spain) 2,663
8. Wayne Ferreira (South Africa) 2,511
9. Yevgeny Kafelnikov (Russia) 2,230
10. Magnus Larsson (Sweden) 2,222
11. Alberto Berasategui (Spain) 2,200
12. Michael Stich (Germany) 2,171
13. Jim Courier (US) 1,978
14. Todd Martin (US) 1,880
15. Richard Krajicek (Netherlands) 1,825
16. Marc Rosset (Switzerland) 1,743
17. Stefan Edberg (Sweden) 1,691
18. Andrei Medvedev (Ukraine) 1,619
19. Andrea Gaudenzi (Italy) 1,484
20. Thomas Enqvist (Sweden) 1,473

Flairs of French Open

PARIS, May 30: Never look beyond the next match, the players insist. But in the case of Andre Agassi and Thomas Muster, it's tempting to peek ahead all the way from the first round of the French Open to a potentially electrifying semifinal, report agencies.

Agassi, the World No. 1, said he enjoyed "a good warm-up lap" Monday against outclassed Karsten Braasch of Germany en route to a straight-sets victory on opening day of the two-week Grand Slam event.

Muster, seeded only fifth but winner of 29 straight matches on clay, looked even more devastating against French qualifier Gerard Solves, shaking off an uncertain start to win 3-6, 6-4, 6-2, 6-1.

Muster has dominated the clay-court season, winning five tournaments en route to the longest clay streak since Wilander in 1982-83.

Agassi has a seemingly smooth path to the semifinals on June 9, and Muster would likely be favoured if he reaches the quarter-finals against the top-ranked player in his bracket, No 4 seed Goran Ivanisevic.

An Agassi-Muster showdown would pit the world's top player against the best player on clay.

Muster, never before considered such a serious threat for a Grand Slam title, said his success this season was due to attitude.

"There's no big secret," he said. "It's more a mental decision and commitment that I am playing well — it hasn't much to do with my physical shape."

"I'm not interested in records," he added. "I could lose at any moment... may be there's going to be someone out there to beat me day after tomorrow."

But Jim Courier, a two-time champion here and an easy first-round winner Monday, said Muster's feats this year — including five straight titles — were striking.

"He is obviously having a great clay court season," Courier said. "I don't think anybody has had a better one leading into the French since I have been following tennis."

Agassi, seeking the only Grand Slam title he lacks, said he was glad to be back at Roland Garros stadium, where he lost in the finals in 1990 and 1991.

"I am here to accomplish something that I have yet to do, and by the same token there is such a safe feeling being back here," he said.

The Las Vegas kid knows as much about showbiz as he does about tennis and he came on court in outlandish garb which drew more attention than his

Ewald's fall from grace

BERLIN, May 30: Manfred Ewald, once known as the father of East German sport, is expected to be charged over his role in systematic doping of athletes, reports AFP.

Around 40 people are being investigated by police over allegations of drug abuse, mainly concerning young athletes, said Manfred Kittlaus, leading the inquiry.

Ewald, 69, was the president of the East German Sports Federation which transformed the former GDR into the world's most successful sporting nation.

East Germany won 153 gold, 129 silver and 97 bronze medals in just five Summer Olympics starting at Mexico City in 1968 and finishing at Seoul in 1988. They missed Los Angeles in 1984 because of a Soviet led boycott.

He is in the frontline after several athletes, including 1980 Olympic 100m swimming champion Jorg Woithe, accused him of being a leading figure in an organised doping system.

Doping cases in Germany doubles

COLOGNE, May 30: The number of positive doping cases in top-class German sport doubled in 1994 from the year before but blood tests are unlikely to be introduced in the near future, doping expert Manfred Jonike said on Monday, reports Reuter.

Donike said it was rubbish to say that traces of doping drugs remained in the blood longer than they do in urine.

Canadian driver Jacques Villeneuve poses with the Borg-Worner Trophy after winning the 79th Indianapolis 500 on May 29. Villeneuve won the race in his second attempt.

— AFP/UNB photo

Ivanisevic in ignominy

PARIS, May 30: Fourth-seeded Goran Ivanisevic became the first major upset victim of the French Open, losing in straight sets to qualifier Mikael Tillstrom of Sweden in the first round Tuesday.

Tillstrom, ranked only 142nd in the world, dominated throughout in a 7-5, 6-3, 6-4 victory interrupted twice by rain, report agencies.

Tillstrom, 23, had played in only one previous Grand Slam event, last year's French Open, when he surprisingly reached the fourth round with a victory over 16th-seeded Richard Krajicek.

It was the first first-round exit at the French Open for Ivanisevic, who has reached the quarter-finals three times. The Croatian also lost in the first round at the Australian Open in January, leaving him winless in this year's Grand Slams.

Wimbledon champ Conchita Martinez, a favourite to win her first French Open, got off to a perfect start with a 6-0, 6-0 victory over Germany's Sabine Hack, who reached the quarter-finals here last year.

Martinez, seeded fourth, extended her winning streak on clay to 20 matches. Three-time champion Steffi Graf, among others, has depicted her as the strongest player in the field, based on current form.

Martinez reached the French Open quarterfinals every year from 1989 through 1993, and had her best showing last year with a semifinal loss to eventual champion Arantxa Sanchez Vicario, her former doubles partner.

Martinez, elated by a 45-minute victory in which she conceded only 14 points, said she had no qualms about being favoured this year.

"I don't feel any pressure at all right now because I am very confident," she said. "I am playing great."

Also advancing before the rain came was sixth-seeded Magdalena Maleeva of Bulgaria, a 6-3, 6-4 winner over American Nicole Arendt.

On Monday, two of the men's favourites took initial steps toward a potentially electrifying semifinal showdown.

Top-seeded Andre Agassi, pursuing the only Grand Slam title he lacks, got off to a comfortable start with a straight-set victory over Karsten Braasch of Germany.

One of Agassi's major rivals, fifth-seeded Thomas Muster of Austria, stumbled early against French qualifier Gerard Solves before steamrolling to a 3-6, 6-4, 6-2, 6-1 victory.

Defending champion Arantxa Sanchez Vicario and two former champions, Jim Courier and Steffi Graf, also advanced easily on a balmy

tegui of Argentina, slamming an overhead to win in exactly one hour. Graf, seeded second, is now 19-0 this year, but hadn't played in a tournament for six weeks.

Courier, a two-time champion seeded only 13th this year, beat fellow American and close friend Jeff Tarango, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3. Courier lost his only previous match on clay this season.

Also advancing were No 8 seed Wayne Ferreira of South Africa, 6-4, 6-4, 7-5 over Lionel Roux of France; No 9 Yevgeny Kafelnikov of Russia, 6-1, 6-2, 6-7 (7-3), 6-3 over Jan Siemerink of the Netherlands, and No 11 Richard Krajicek of the Netherlands over Germany's Martin Sinner, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3.

Two unseeded veterans advanced in contrasting styles — Guy Forget of France struggled past Poland's Wojtek Kowalski, 6-4, 5-7, 6-7 (10-8), 6-2, 6-4, and three-time champion Mats Wilander won 7-5, 7-5, 6-4 over Derrick Rostagno of the United States.

Among the women, No 8 seed Gabriela Sabatini beat Radka Bobkova of the Czech Republic, 6-2, 6-0 and No 11 Anke Huber beat Barbara Schett of Austria, 6-3, 7-5.

Bruguera, seeded No 7, seeks to become only the second man in the modern era to win three straight French Opens — Bjorn Borg won four straight from 1978-81.

The man considered the biggest threat to Agassi and Muster, two-time defending champion Sergi Bruguera, was to open play Tuesday against Patrick Rafter of Australia.

Other featured matches included second-seeded Pete Sampras against Austria's Gilbert Schaller and No 3 Boris Becker against Argentina's Javier Frana.

All but one of the seeds in action Monday won, including Sanchez Vicario and No 2 seed Graf among the women.

The lone upset victim was Helena Sukova, No 15, who fell to Japan's 83rd-ranked Ai Sugiyama, 4-6, 6-3, 9-7. It was the first victory for Sugiyama in a Grand Slam event.

Agassi, seeking his third consecutive Grand Slam title, needed only a routine effort to overcome Braasch, 6-1, 6-4, 6-4, in an uninspiring Center Court match.

Agassi said he struggled to get his rhythm against Braasch's unorthodox serve.

"But I did what I needed to do," he said. "I feel physically strong, mentally strong."

Sanchez Vicario, the top women's seed, breezed past 89th-ranked Sung-Hee Park of South Korea, 6-1, 6-0 in just 52 minutes.

Graf, a three-time champion, advanced with a 6-1, 7-5 victory over Ines Gorrochategui.

A tale of two soccer junkies

HONG KONG, May 30: Soccer fans come in three types: There's the couch potato who follows his team on television, there's the dedicated fan who will go around the country to watch his boys. Then there are Bob Goodwin and Fred Dowry, reports AFP.

No matter where Tottenham Hotspur play in the world, no matter the cost or conditions, Goodwin and Dowry will be there.

Their obsession with the London club has taken them up and down the British isles, around Europe, Japan, behind the former iron curtain and now Hong Kong, China and Singapore.

"It's difficult to conceive what I would do if they weren't there," says Dowry. "It's a huge chunk of my life."

Dowry, 38, tubby, bearded and is expected, last missed a Spurs game four years ago at Hartlepool, when he was on holiday. Goodwin recalls the trauma of a boxing day in the 1970s, when he could find no transport to get him to a game.

The two took time out from programme — buying and souvenir — hunting during Tottenham's recent Asian tour to describe the pain and pleasure of being a Spurs addict.

"Last year, we were the only fans to travel to Oldham three times for the same game. The weather wasn't wonderful the first time, but I said it was well-known that northerners all go home and have their tea before a game. It was rained off," Dowry recalled.

The second time was when we took a cab out to the ground and the roads were so empty I realised we'd done it again."

Then there was the time they travelled to a friendly in Rome last year.

Not even the players made that trip.

Apparently someone in Rome had been putting the story around (that the match was on) and there was no truth in it at all."

Their dedication is appreciated and occasionally acknowledged by club officials.

Tottenham chief executive Claude Littner, who expected a few supporters in Hong Kong, was so surprised to meet Goodwin and Dowry in China that he invited them for a post-match drink. Club secretary Peter Barnes popped by for a chat in the foyer of the Guangzhou hotel where the team was staying.

"The players say hello, but they're not important, it's the club that matters," Goodwin says.

After China, the pair went to Singapore, where they saw Tottenham lose on penalties. The Hong Kong match was Juergen Klinsmann's last for the side. He scored twice in a 7-2 victory.

The pair are reasonably well paid — Dowry works at British Telecom and Goodwin for a firm of solicitors — but admit their passion is frighteningly expensive.

"It could easily cost eight or nine thousand pounds (12,000 to 13,500 US dollars) a year, sometimes more. It's worth it, though. Some people pay that sort of money to buy stamps," argues Goodwin.

A good run in European competitions can wreck the bank balance.

"I saved quite a sum in the seventies, when we didn't qualify for Europe for seven seasons," explains Dowry.

To supplement their income, the pair feed a growing market for soccer memorabilia. Before the game against Guan-Gzhou, southern China, on Wednesday they discovered there were no programmes, so picked up as many official team sheets as possible, even

needed home-grown remedy to the then-dominant trio of American wrestlers from Hawaii — Akebono, Konishiki and Musashimaru.

Takanohana, who stands 1.85 metres (6-foot, 1-inch) tall and weighs 147 kilograms (323 pounds), has lived up to the challenge.

Earlier this month, he won his ninth career tournament championship. Akebono, the only other wrestler at the top rank of "yokozuna" or grand champion, has eight.

What's more, none of the Americans — or any other Japanese wrestler for that matter — has come anywhere near the popularity and respect Takanohana commands outside the ring.

The International Tennis Federation said Tuesday that it had upheld its earlier decision to play the Sept. 22-24 tie at Moscow's Olympic Stadium.

The ITF overruled the Russian Federation's request to play in Sochi, saying the venue wasn't easily accessible.

ITF spokesman Ian Barnes said the Russians had now accepted the decision after receiving a letter of explanation.

"If they want to lay a clay court, we will give them any help they need," Barnes said. "They can use the court of their choice."

The Russians had wanted to play on a clay court in Sochi. The Moscow venue has traditionally had a Supreme carpet surface.

Sino swimmers in friendly France

PARIS, May 30: China's swimmers were welcomed with open arms at their first international competition here Monday since being plugged into controversy over drug-taking at last year's Asian Games, reports AFP.

"Why should all the swimmers other than those who tested positive for drugs be forced to stay in their own country," said Sandra Volker, the German who lost a short-course world 50m record last year to Bai Xuyi, who a few days later tested positive for ephedrine.

Ye Peipei, who won the 50m in 26.36sec and was runner-up in the 100m freestyle, only wanted to talk about visiting the Louvre Museum.

Han Yuhui, second in the 50m butterfly, was more interested in French fashions and perfume.

Roger Gueret, organiser of the meeting, said neither the French Olympic Committee nor the Swimming Federation had asked him to bar the Chinese swimmers.

"There was no reason for not to welcome them with open arms as we have done in the past," he said.

However, for the first time in 12 years drug tests were carried out at the meeting.

The Chinese have sent a squad of four women and two men to Europe, where they will also compete in Barcelona, Monaco and Israel, as part of their build-up for the World Student Games in Fukuoka, Japan in August.

Seven swimmers, including world champions Lu Bin and Yang Aihua, were among 11 Chinese athletes to fail drug tests at the Asian Games last October. In the Hiroshima, seven brought to 10 the number of Chinese swimmers to have failed dope tests.

Lu, Yang and five swimming coaches have since been banned for two years. China was also excluded from this year's Pan-Pacific swimming championships in Atlanta in August.

China withdrew from this year's shortcourse World Cup but denied it was because of the drug scandal. Sports officials said they were training new talent and resting after an arduous campaign.

China's women swimmers took 12 of the 16 titles at the World Championships last September when doubt were first raised about their performances.

Taylor undefeated

SYDNEY, May 30: Unbeaten Australian junior welterweight boxing champion Shannan Taylor scored a decisive but controversial victory Monday over experienced American Buck Smith, reports AP.

Taylor, 23, won a technical decision on points after a cut eyelid prevented him from fighting beyond the fifth round.

Referee Charlie Lucas ruled the injury had been caused by an accidental head clash. The three judges had Taylor ahead by margins of 5, 6 and 7 points after five rounds.

But Smith and his manager Sean Gibbons were adamant the cut was caused by a left hook.

Even Taylor admitted he was unsure what caused the cut, but despite the controversial ending, there was no doubt about the decision.

Smith, who claimed he had never been floored in 183 recorded contests, visited the canvas twice.

The first knockdown came courtesy of a left hook in the third round, and a left rip to the body put him down in the fifth.

Taylor, at 144 pounds (65.6 kilos), improved his record to 11 wins and is a step closer to a possible match with International Boxing Federation world champion Kostya Tszyu.

Smith, 29, of Oklahoma City, now reportedly has a record of 175 wins, 8 losses and one draw.

ITF sticks to guns

PARIS, May 30: The Davis Cup semifinal between Russia and Germany will definitely be held in Moscow, despite Russia's desire to stage the event in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, reports AP.

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Takanohana ties the knot

TOKYO, May 30: He's a tad overweight, and tends to be seen in public wearing little more than a loincloth and a scowl. But on Monday, the famous turned out and the fans tuned in to see Takanohana, the superstar of sumo, tie the knot, reports AP.

"Super Big Event of the Century," one network TV listing dubbed the bash, which altogether will reportedly cost something in the vicinity of four million dollars.

Hyge aside, the 22-year-old sumo star's wedding couldn't have come at a better time for Japan.

For months, attentions here have been dominated by killer earthquakes, looming trade wars and the doings of a

doomsday cult suspected of being behind a wave of terror.

But on Monday, prime time — and much of the afternoon — was all Takanohana.

"I'm very happy," the wrestler said in his trademark gruff, breathless voice. "It's finally happened."

"I feel the same way," said his new bride, the former Keiko Kono, a well-known television personality.

Takanohana, whose thubby, boyish looks have helped make him a teeny-bopper idol, became a national sensation four years ago as he and his big brother rose rapidly through the ranks of Japan's ancient national sport.

His ascent was cheered by many Japanese as a much-

needed home-grown remedy to the then-dominant trio of American wrestlers from Hawaii — Akebono, Konishiki and Musashimaru.

Earlier this month, he won his ninth career tournament championship. Akebono, the only other wrestler at the top rank of "yokozuna" or grand champion, has eight.

What's more, none of the Americans — or any other Japanese wrestler for that matter — has come anywhere near the popularity and respect Takanohana commands outside the ring.