

Doubles goes to 'Spice Girls'

MELBOURNE, Jan 29 (AP/Reuters): Martina Hingis and Anna Kournikova, calling themselves the 'Spice Girls' of tennis, combined to win the Australian Open doubles title Friday.



The duo of Swiss Martina Hingis (R) and Russian Anna Kournikova hold the Australian Open women's doubles trophy in Melbourne yesterday. — AP/UNB photo

Hingis and Kournikova beat the team of No. 1 singles player Lindsay Davenport and No. 1-ranked doubles player Natasha Zvereva 7-5, 6-3.

It was Kournikova's first Grand Slam title, coming at the end of a disappointing singles campaign marked by service woes.

Hingis, who coined the 'Spice Girls' nickname for her and Kournikova earlier this week, won a Grand Slam of doubles titles last year and a fifth doubles title in a row Friday.

She teamed with Mirjana Lucic to win the Australian Open and added the French, US and Wimbledon titles with Jana Novotna.

The only other players to complete the Grand Slam were Martina Navratilova and Pam Shriver, who did it together in 1984. They won a record eight titles in succession between 1983 and 1985.

Zvereva, who said she would be back next season, 'Unless I retire,' congratulated Kournikova on her breakthrough Slam victory.

'That's her first Grand Slam and I'm sure she's going to have more to come,' Zvereva said.

The match took place under cover at Melbourne Park because of morning rain.

Davenport and Zvereva took a 5-3 lead in the first set by breaking Kournikova's suspect service.

But Hingis and Kournikova won the next four games, breaking both of their rivals in the process.

All four players lost a service game in the second set and Hingis and Kournikova finished it off with their third break off Zvereva in the set. A sharp return from Kournikova set up Hingis for a volley at the net.

The winners, popular with the crowd, embraced mid-court following the final point.

Hingis and Kournikova had never played together before this tournament but are close friends off the court.

Hingis has said she has promised Novotna that she would rejoin her for the rest of the season.

Gil being realistic

MADRID, Jan 29: Atletico Madrid president Jesus Gil said on Thursday that if Brazilian midfielder Juninho was happy then it might be better if he left the club, reports Reuters.

'The supporters want him to stay but I have a coach (Arrigo Sacchi) and I respect what he says,' Gil said.

He added: 'It is up to Juninho to convince the coach that he is a figure to be reckoned with on the field and not just in the media.'

Gil said he had been surprised to see photographs in the Spanish media of Juninho and his representatives in the English Midlands city of Birmingham on Wednesday.

The player was apparently discussing the terms of a possible transfer to Aston Villa when he was supposed to be in Barcelona prior to playing in an anti-drugs friendly match.

However, Juninho made it back to the Catalan city in time for the kick-off and played the first 30 minutes.

Juninho wants to be part of Sacchi's starting 11 rather than frequently being named among the Atletico substitutes.

'But if the coach does not want to put him in then it's not my fault,' said Gil. 'It's not easy to say but it could be better if he leaves.'

Juninho joined Atletico from English club Middlesbrough in the summer of 1997 for 19.3 million US dollars.

Row over 'half-man' remark

MELBOURNE, Jan 29 (Reuters/Internet): The world's top two women's players denied on Friday they were talking about anything but tennis when they said Australian Open finalist Amelie Mauresmo was like a man.

The 19-year-old Mauresmo has powerful shoulders and a game to match. She downed world number one Lindsay Davenport in the semifinals on Thursday with a fearsome display of power tennis.

She is also openly gay and speaks freely about her relationship with her on the tour.

But the player was said by her coach to be angered by comments from Davenport and a remark attributed to defending champion Martina Hingis, whom she will play in Saturday's women final.

Hingis was quoted as saying in a German-language news conference on Thursday: 'She travels with her girlfriend, she is half a man' - or in German: 'Sie ist ein halber Mann.'

'She has the feeling that she played really well and she did well, so she's surprised that the number one and the number two in the world could talk about her like that,' Mauresmo's coach, Christophe Fourrière, told Channel Seven television.

'She thought everyone would talk about her tennis and not her private life. That is a bit surprising for her because she's young.'

Hingis and Davenport both said their words had been twisted by the press.

Hingis denied she had ever used the 'half-man' remark.

'A half-man? Who would say that?' Hingis said. 'She's a girl, she's playing tennis... very good and I have to beat her on court, not somewhere else.'

Asked to explain what she had said in the news conference with Swiss and German reporters, Hingis said she had mentioned Mauresmo's girlfriend and had spoken about her style of play.

'She has got a lot of topspin and it's nice... that she is a man but she plays really like a man, the way she plays. That's what we were saying with Lindsay, I think both of us.'

Davenport - who said after being beaten by Mauresmo, 'I thought I was playing a guy' - angrily accused reporters of taking her words out of context.

'That helps me to be the girl that stays on court longest and for my service,' Mauresmo said.

'Mauresmo disturbs,' said Le Parisien of the teenager whose mental strength has carried her through the difficulties of coming out as a lesbian.

Former French Davis Cup and Fed Cup captain Yannick Noah is regarded as having been instrumental in Mauresmo's rise over the last eight months since she reached her first senior final in Berlin in May.

Noah picked Mauresmo over veteran Nathalie Tauziat for the Fed Cup semifinal against Switzerland and although she did not win her matches, she was within a whisker of beating Hingis, who she also took three sets in the second round of the U.S. Open.

Mauresmo, world junior champion in 1996 after victories at Roland Garros and Wimbledon, said that then she tended to win primarily on the basis of her strength.

'I soon realised that wouldn't be enough in seniors,' Mauresmo told Le Figaro.

But Mauresmo still bases her improving game on her athletic build, saying she goes to the gym three times a week.

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Kafelnikov nears another Slam title

MELBOURNE, Jan 29: Playing with robotic precision from the baseline, Russia's Yevgeny Kafelnikov reached the final of the Australian Open and virtually guaranteed he'll walk away with the title, reports AP.

Kafelnikov, the tenth seed and winner of the 1996 French Open, beat Germany's Tommy Haas 6-3, 6-4, 7-5 Friday night as he will play for his second Grand Slam title Sunday against unseeded Swede Thomas Enqvist.

'I know I will get my chances,' Kafelnikov said. 'Thomas is known, I wouldn't say for choking, but...'

Kafelnikov pointed out how Enqvist has had lapses in some big matches and could be vulnerable on his serve.

Against Haas, Kafelnikov broke on his first opportunity in the second game, saved a break point at 5-3, then polished off the set with an ace.

Haas, a 20-year-old ranked No 33, performed well in his first major semifinal, but couldn't match Kafelnikov's strength and stamina in long rallies over the next two sets.

Kafelnikov 24, simply stayed back and slugged it out, making Haas sprint from corner to corner until he broke down.

Enqvist reached his first Grand Slam tournament final a day earlier by beating 91st-ranked Nicolas Pietrangeli of Ecuador 6-3, 7-5, 6-1.

Enqvist, set back last year by a foot injury, now has won 14 consecutive matches this year, including victories over US Open champion Patrick Rafter and runner-up Mark Philippoussis in the third and fourth rounds here.

'It's very exciting, unbelievable, to be in a Grand Slam final,' said the 24-year-old Swede, who once ranked sixth in the world and now is No 21. Enqvist's best previous Grand Slam tournament result was the 1996 Australian, where he lost in the quarterfinals.

French newspapers highlighted the big 19-year-old's physical power and the all-round strengths of her game.

'Mauresmo right up there,' said the sports daily L'Equipe in a banner headline.

'It seems to us that French sport has discovered a real champion,' L'Equipe said in a front page editorial.

'She has all it takes to be great,' it said in an inside page headline.

Amelie Mauresmo, head and shoulders, said a headline in the sports section of the left wing daily Liberation, pointing to the Frenchwoman's mental and physical strengths.

'All-powerful Amelie Mauresmo,' was the title of a profile on the fast rising Frenchwoman in Le Figaro.

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Women take centre stage

MELBOURNE, Jan 29 (AP/Reuters): Amelie Mauresmo, who hits like a man, meets Martina Hingis, who hits like a woman, in an Australian Open final Saturday.

The No. 2-ranked Hingis, who is on a 20-match winning streak, is playing for her third consecutive title here.

Her opponent, the 19-year-old Mauresmo, was winning the 1996 French Open and Wimbledon junior titles when Hingis, 18, was starting to make her mark on the regular pro-Tour.

Mauresmo shot up the rankings from 109th to 29th last year. She now could become only the second unseeded woman's singles winner in the 120-year-old events of the three-decade-old Open Era. The last was Australian Chris O'Neil, at the 1978 Australian Open.

Mauresmo upset No. 1 Lindsay Davenport, who said the Frenchwoman hit the ball so hard it was like playing a man.

Mauresmo, who now will rise to at least No. 18 in the rankings, said she took Davenport's comments about her strength as a compliment.

Hingis considers herself the favourite against Mauresmo, whom she has beaten in two three-set matches.

'I have winning record, but not a very easy one,' Hingis said.

Like Davenport, Hingis noted that Mauresmo's sizzling one-handed backhand looks like a man's shot.

'On the court she moves very quickly and the way she plays is very unusual in women's tennis. She has a lot of topspin,' Hingis said Friday.

'She's producing very good tennis. She played very consistently these two weeks and beating Lindsay, I mean, it's a great effort.'

'I hope to do better.'

Mauresmo almost didn't make it past the first round, staving off two match points in her victory over American Corina Morariu.

'My coach told me that usually when it happens like this, players are winning the tournament, or going very far,' she said.

Mauresmo said she beat Davenport with a plan that was to mix it up a little bit, make her run, make her move a lot, try to take a slice backhand that I play really well, and push on her forehand.'

And she has a strategy worked out for Martina. 'I know how to play Martina. I played her twice last year. I will have tactics.'

Davenport's No. 1 ranking is safe, even if Hingis wins here.

Davenport said Hingis may respond better than she did to Mauresmo's game.

'It will be an interesting final,' she said.

'Amelie has to hold her serve easily so she can get chances to break in the match. Martina, I think, likes the ball she (Mauresmo) hits. Martina takes the ball early.'

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Chelsea go for crucial clash

United last played at The Valley in February 1957 when they won 5-1 with Bobby Charlton scoring the first hat-trick of his league career.

United look easily capable of winning by a similar scoreline on Sunday with their twin strike force of Dwight Yorke (17 goals) and Andy Cole (15) scoring more goals than either of the whole of the Charlton team have managed this season.

Second placed Aston Villa go to Newcastle keen for a victory after the worst week of their season.

Last week they were humbled 2-0 by second division leaders Fulham in the FA Cup and then made headlines for all the wrong reasons with Stan Collymore seeking counselling for stress.

Manager John Gregory has given Collymore scant support and he definitely will not play against a Newcastle side also looking for an upturn in fortunes after one win in six league matches.

Fifth-placed Leeds and sixth-placed Liverpool should keep up the pressure on the leading quartet by gaining at least a point each from their matches at relegation-threatened Southampton and Coventry respectively.

Southampton crashed 7-1 to Liverpool two weeks ago and will find Leeds no less formidable with David O'Leary's men looking for another success on the south coast after winning at nearby Portsmouth 5-1 in the FA Cup last week.

Liverpool, defeated 2-1 by Manchester United in the cup last week after conceding two very late goals, look to be too strong for erratic Coventry who have won only one of their last nine league matches, but played superbly to win 3-0 at Leicester in the cup last week.

An interesting situation could develop at Selhurst Park where Wimbledon, breaking off from their never-ending saga against Tottenham, play West Ham.

John Hartson, who has just joined Wimbledon for a record 11.52 million dollars, will be keen to score against the club he left three weeks ago, while West Ham could give a debut to Marc-Vivien Foe who joined the Hammers from RC Lens this week.

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