

Indian duo upbeat

LONDON, June 26 (AFP): A doubles double looms ever closer for top-seeded Indian pair Mahesh Bhupathi and Leander Paes.

Bhupathi and Paes have a third-round men's encounter with US pair Patrick Galbraith and Justin Gimelstrop, the 16th seeds, to look forward to - and Bhupathi says he believes a Wimbledon crown can follow on from French Open glory earlier this month.

"Coming out and winning in straight sets is a great boost to our confidence," said Bhupathi.

"We're feeling pretty good on the grass. I don't think there's any pressure on us at all. I don't think we expected anything of ourselves on grass."

"On grass, the Woodies are the team to beat. We won't complain if they don't make it to the final," he laughed.

Bhupathi said he was relieved that reigning champions Paul Haarhuis and Jacco Eltingh of the Netherlands are no longer around following Eltingh's retirement.

"I think we were the last team to beat them. Jacco has made his choice."

"They were a great doubles team and it would have been nice to have them here," said Bhupathi, who said he and Paes were not thinking about a possible final appearance yet.

"We still have three or four games to win before we get there. There's a long way to go."

B&H Super Cup Lykes through, Lancs crash

LONDON, June 26: Yorkshire skipper David Byas savaged Hampshire to smash and unbeaten 104 from 112 balls and power his side into the Benson and Hedges Super Cup semifinals with a nine-wicket win at Headingley, reports AFP.

Byas and Australian Greg Blewett made light of a target of 188 and took Yorkshire to within two runs of victory before Blewett was bowled of an inside edge by West Indian Nixon McLean.

Blewett made 71 from 121 balls with six and five fours but it was Byas who led the way throughout their 186 partnership which took the home side to victory with more than 10 overs to spare.

Hampshire captain Robin Smith said: "Sometimes you just have to hold your hand up and admit that you were beaten by a better side, and this was one of those days."

But at Old Trafford Lancashire slumped out of the competitions as Sussex carved out a four-wicket win with five overs left.

The thrashing leaves Dav Whatmore in a precarious position. Whatmore wants to stay on for the rest of the season before taking over Sri Lanka in the autumn but the club's power-brokers have to consider the potential threat to the morale of a struggling team.

And it now seems possible that Lancashire will ask him to leave after the full committee have debated the issue at their July 5 meeting.

Chairman Jack Simmons said: "Dav has said that he wants to stay but it might not be as easy as that."

Now judge in dire straits

BUENOS AIRES, June 26: A federal judge denied in published reports Friday that he would resign after the controversial manager of Diego Maradona was cleared of drug charges this week, reports AP.

Judge Hernan Bernasconi was harshly criticised by some Tuesday after a prosecutor in the case against Guillermo Coppola surprisingly moved to have the charges dismissed, accusing Bernasconi and several police officers of trumping up the charges and fabricating evidence.

In a nationally televised ruling, a judge on Wednesday threw out the case, adding that there was sufficient proof to warrant a Senate inquiry into Bernasconi's handling of the investigation.

Maradona, seated in the audience with his wife during most of the trial, Kissed Coppola on the cheek after the verdict was announced. A relieved Coppola circled the room shaking the hands of friends.

Seles stoops to Lucic

LONDON, June 26: Monica Seles' dreams of winning Wimbledon, the one Grand Slam title to elude her, were shattered on Centre Court when the American fourth seed was beaten 7-6, 7-6 by Croatian Mirjana Lucic in the third round on Friday, reports Reuters.

Seles was one of three top women to fall by the wayside as 13th seed Sandrine Testud of France lost 6-2, 1-6, 6-3 to Tamarine Tanasugarn of Thailand and South Africa's Amanda Coetzer, seeded 12, went down 6-2, 6-4 to 16-year-old qualifier Kim Clijsters.

The men's draw was also robbed of one of its biggest names when Russian Yevgeny Kafelnikov, seeded third, was forced to retire because of a thigh injury in the third set of his match with Frenchman Cedric Pioline, a finalist here in 1997.

Kafelnikov, winner of the Australian Open and world number one earlier this year, said he had pulled a hamstring in his right leg in the fourth game of the first set, which he won.

"I think I made the right decision not to continue," he said. "It's a big disappointment." Pioline, who won the second set, said: "I wasn't playing as well as I have done in previous matches so this was fortunate for me."

But it was business as usual for top seed Pete Sampras, bidding for a record sixth title, as he swept past British part-timer Danny Sapsford 6-3, 6-4, 7-5 to reach the last 16.

Seventh seed Mark Philippoussis used his power to crush Spain's Francisco Clavet 7-5, 6-6, 4-6 and Karol Kucera reached the fourth round for the first time in six visits to the All England club by beating Daniel Vacek in four sets.

Local hero Tim Henman lost concentration in the second set against France's Sebastien Grosjean, giving the patriotic centre crowd a jolt but the sixth seed recovered to win 6-1, 6-7, 6-3, 6-2 and book a showdown with the old slugger Jim Courier.

The unseeded American showed the guts that took him to the top of the tennis rankings in 1992 by outlasting Sjeng Schalken of the Netherlands 7-6, 3-6, 3-6, 7-5, 13-11 but he needed an intravenous drip afterwards to ease dehydration.

Courier's first-round match took just over two hours, his second - another five-setter - just over three hours but his battle against Schalken took nearly 4-1/2 hours - the longest so far this tournament - and had the crowd howling for more.

"When the going gets tough, he seems to pull through and that is the sign of a great player. I shall look forward to Monday," Henman said of his match with Courier.

Britain's other seed, number nine Greg Rusedski, emerged unscathed from a potential minefield against Magnus Norman of Sweden to win 6-3, 6-4, 7-5 and qualify for a fourth-round clash of howitzers against Philippoussis.

The exists of top seed Martina Hingis and Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario had opened up the end of the women's draw and Seles' departure moves a dangerous obstacle lower down.

A finalist here in 1992, Seles lost a spectacular and sometimes strange match in which Lucic, ranked 134th in the world, won the first set against the run of play.

She won only one point in Seles' first six service games and struggled to hold her own serve, then opened a 6-0 lead in the tie-break. Seles saved four set points before Lucic won it 7-4.

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"There's still so many good players out there," she said. Williams, seeded sixth, dropped just two games against Sarah Pitkowski of France as did Tauziat of France against Seda Noorlander of the Netherlands.

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Kournikova: Be careful

LONDON, June 26: Wimbledon will have to postpone its love-affair with Russian pin-up Anna Kournikova to another year, powerful American and fellow teen Venus Williams vowed Friday, reports AFP.

Venus, who has won four titles already this year, and whose serve packs a punch at 180 kph, chewed up and spat out yet another opponent at the All England Club as she blitzed French hope Sarah Pitkowski 6-1, 6-1 in her third-round clash.

And she lost no time saying that the same fate awaited Kournikova, who ousted Ines Gorochategui after the Argentine withdrew injured midway through the set.

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CHAMPIONSHIPS CHIPS

WIMBLEDON, June 26 (AP/Reuters): Monica Seles bowed out at Wimbledon on Friday, then denied she has reached a career crossroads.

The fourth-seeded Seles, who has never won Wimbledon, was eliminated by 17-year-old Mirjana Lucic 7-6 (7-4), 7-6 (7-4).

It's been three years since Seles' comeback, and she's still not sure whether she can recapture her dominant form of the early 1990s. But she took inspiration from Steffi Graf's French Open victory.

"So many things have to come together," she said. "Suddenly, Steffi, it all came together for her. So I just don't know. Time will tell."

Seles lost only one point on her first six service games before losing the tiebreak. But she said her return wasn't working, and she didn't take advantage of numerous break-point opportunities.

COURT INVASION

Anna Kournikova was unfazed by a security breach that allowed a fan to walk onto her court during play Friday.

"I didn't know how it happened but I turned around and he was already leaving," the 18-year-old Russian said.

"Of course we're very close to the spectators, but I don't think it represents any danger. I like it when the courts are small and when the spectators are close to you. It feels cozy and warm."

THAI STYLE

Tamarine Tanasugarn isn't a name on everyone's lips, except in Thailand, although she made a mark Friday at Wimbledon by beating 13th-seeded Sandrine Testud 6-2, 1-6, 6-3 to earn a fourth-round clash with Mirjana Lucic.

The 22-year-old Tanasugarn, born in Hollywood, California, is now based in Thailand, where she is honored by the King and Prime Minister and carried her country's flag at the Olympics.

After finishing 1998 inside the top 40, she started this year with six successive losses. She got back into form by winning a pre-Wimbledon challenger event.

GUARDIAN ANGELS

It can be tough on the women's tour. That's why the WTA has introduced an Athlete Assistance Division, which pairs rising stars with retired players who can help them out with some friendly advice.

Anna Kournikova says she "talks all the time" with her mentor, Kathy Rinaldi.

Other big names with protégés — players 18 years or under who are ranked in the top 100 — include Martina Navratilova, who assists Russia's Olga Barabanschikova, and Chris Evert, who guides Martina Hingis.

Zina Garrison works with Serena Williams, while her older sister, Venus, chose Pam Shriver.

"It's been a good relationship. We're similar players because she has a lot of height like I do," Venus said. "We have a few things in common."

VENUS 2, ANNA 0

Venus Williams and Anna Kournikova, two of tennis' most photographed teenage stars, will meet in the fourth round Monday at Wimbledon.

Williams has won both previous meetings — last year in three sets in a hardcourt final in Key Biscayne, Florida, and again this spring 6-2, 6-2 on clay in the Italian Open.

Williams has the edge, but she's up against perhaps Wimbledon's most popular player. And she knows it.

"I've been able to see some of Kournikova's matches because I'm at home and I'm watching BBC. I'm watching Wimbledon with everyone else," Williams said after beating Sarah Pitkowski 6-1, 6-1 on Friday.

MAC ON BORIS

John McEnroe, back on the comeback trail at Wimbledon, believes that Boris Becker is still a serious contender for the coveted singles title.

"Who is to say he cannot go all the way," McEnroe said of Becker's last hurrah at the age of 31.

"He knows he has to dig deeper than he ever has before but he's a remarkable person, a fine champion," McEnroe, 40, wrote in his Daily Telegraph column.

SPREAD BETTING

Gamblers devoted to the arcane sport of spread betting can have a field day at the Centre Court tussle with the Italian teenage heartthrob Lleyton Hewitt.

"The 'Auf Wiedersehen Boris' market tempts punters to pick the number of aces, trademark Becker dives on to the grass and the number of tears shed by the German who has achieved tennis sainthood in Britain.

You can even bet on the number of times the camera cuts away live to the girlfriends of British heroes Tim Henman and Greg Rusedski during their Wimbledon matches.

So far, Henman's girlfriend, Lucy Heald, is leading 3-2 over Rusedski's Lucy Connor.

BRAVE CENTRE COURT

Nowadays, Wimbledon's Centre Court comes under fire from the master blasters — the booming big servers who have transformed the modern power game.

In World War Two, the court really did come under attack. A total of 16 German bombs landed on the All England Club. One flattened a corner of the Centre Court. But Wimbledon did everything it could to promote the war effort.

The car parks were ploughed up to grow vegetables; pigs, chickens, ducks and geese were housed in temporary wooden homes and the main concourse echoed to the sound of soldiers drilling on what became a makeshift parade ground.

An endearing debut

laughter from the crowd, and she shanked three serves.

"She needs to work on it a little bit," McEnroe said dryly. "Steffi was laughing, but I wasn't."

McEnroe, who remains active in senior tennis, prompted snickers himself by blowing a couple of easy overheads. But for the most part he played well.

His look is a bit different — the hair has gone gray, and the wooden racket went out with the trash long ago. But his unique back-to-the-net service motion remains deceptive, and his touch on volleys still ranks with the best in the sport.

Also familiar were the facial expressions. Almost every time McEnroe lost a point, he frowned and shook his head in disbelief. He was clearly the team captain, doing most of the talking between points and on changeovers.

"He's mumbling a few things," Graf said with a smile. "Nothing extremely special."

Several times McEnroe shouted "no!" to call Graf off shots sailing long. She once swung at the ball anyway, immediately realised her mistake and squealed "doh!", sounding like a high-pitched Homer Simpson. But otherwise Graf played like a champion.

German Steffi Graf (R) and American John McEnroe greet each other after their victory in the mixed doubles at the Wimbledon on June 25.

Thompson new FA chairman

LONDON, June 26: Geoff Thompson has been voted in Saturday as the new chairman of the English game's governing body Football Association (FA), reports AFP.

Thompson saw off the challenge of Ipswich chairman David Sheepsheads, although his winning margin of 53 votes to 31 was closer than expected.

Thompson, who had been acting chairman since Keith Wiseman departed six months ago over the cash-for-votes scandal, won thanks to the backing of the Premier League and most of the FA Council's county members.

He was voted in by the 84 Council members, who were present at Saturday's annual meeting, at the Carden Park