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Venus on course

TENNIS

SYDNEY, Sept 24: Venus Williams survived a thrilling three-set battle with Spain's Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario to move within two matches of adding an Olympic gold to the Wimbledon and US Open titles she has won this year, reports AFP.

Williams, unbeaten since losing to Sanchez-Vicario in the quarterfinals of the French Open in June, looked in serious danger of falling to her at the same stage here.

But in difficult, cold and windy conditions on the Olympic Centre Court, she rallied from a set down to pull through 3-6, 6-2, 6-4.

"I didn't have my best day today," Williams admitted. "I just relied on some experience and some guts."

"Every game was pretty close most of the time. A lot of the time I was hitting winners and she was getting nice balls back. I just had to keep going, keep trying."

Williams now faces her American teammate Monica Seles, to whom she has never lost, for a place in Wednesday's final. Monday's other semifinal will pit home favourite Jelena Dokic against Elena Dementieva, the tenth seed from Russia.

The defeat of Sanchez-Vicario means Williams has now won 30 matches in a row, a run that has seen her establish herself firmly as the dominant force in the women's game.

But Sanchez-Vicario has never been any respecter of reputations and she made the American fight every inch of the way. Even at 4-1 down in the final set she was battling ferociously, pulling it back to 4-3 and then saving match points at 5-3 and 5-4 before finally succumbing to her opponent's superior firepower.

Williams had failed to hold her serve once in the first set which saw her rattled by Sanchez-Vicario's punchy returning and tenacious pursuit of every ball.

The Spaniard claimed a vital psychological edge when she claimed a long hard game on her eighth break point.

The next two games also went against serve before Sanchez-Vicario managed to hold hers for a 4-2 lead. At that point Williams began to look in serious danger. Four unforced errors gifted her opponent the next game and a double fault finally allowed Sanchez-Vicario to clinch the set.

Williams responded immediately by stepping up a gear to claim a break in the first game of the second set and went on to claim the set 6-2, setting up a tense finale.

Dokic earned her shot at a place in the final by beating South Africa's Amanda Coetzer.

The 17-year-old, a semifinalist at Wimbledon this year, beat the 7th seeded Coetzer, 6-1, 1-6, 6-1, to the delight of Australia's legions of tennis fans after the country's men's stars Pat Rafter, Mark Philippoussis and Lleyton Hewitt all made early exits.

Dementieva came through against Austria's Barbara Schett, 2-6, 6-2, 6-1.

Dokic was brimming with confidence about her prospects of making a final appearance in front of her home crowd.

"I said to myself if I can get through today I can get a medal," she said. "Now I'm even thinking about a silver."

"The way I'm playing now I can win my next match."

Seles downed Belgium's Dominique Van Roost 6-0, 6-2, erasing the memory of a bitterly disappointing loss to Jana Novotna at the same stage in Atlanta four years ago.

"I thought about it this morning when I woke up," Seles said. "But I said at least if I'm going to lose today I'm going to lose the right way, not like that."

In the men's singles, an astonishing run of upsets continued when Germany's Tommy Haas dumped sixth seed Alex Corretja of Spain out of the tournament 7-6, 6-3.



NO HURDLE IS HURDLE ENOUGH: Favourite Colin Jackson of Great Britain crossing a hurdle during the men's 110 metres hurdles heats yesterday.

—AFP photo

Johnson gets off perfectly

SYDNEY, Sept 24: American Allen Johnson's attempt to become only the third 110m hurdler in Olympic history to successfully defend his title got off to the perfect start here on Sunday despite driving rain sweeping across the track. reports AFP.

The 29-year-old, who is a two-time world outdoor champion, breezed through his heats and into the semifinals without any obvious sign of the hamstring problems that have plagued him as he began his countdown for Monday night's final.

He failed to finish at Yoko-hama on September 9 but he shrugged off fears that he will have problems completing his race for history.

"It is not 100 per cent but probably 95 per cent, after running the first heats I reckon when I wake up tomorrow it will still be sore but the important thing is I didn't feel it in the race," he said.

"The cold weather didn't bother me. Everything is good," he added, giving the thumbs-up sign.

Arch-rival world record holder and world champion Colin Jackson is determined to spoil Johnson's attempt and finally get himself an Olympic gold.

"I feel very confident," he said after easily winning both his heats.

"I think that this time I can add an Olympic gold to my collection because I think Allen is still hurt," he added.

America's second choice Mark Crear, who has always failed to deliver the killer punch when it is needed came third in his second heat in 13.60 — but safe in the knowledge he has plenty left in reserve.

Earlier this year he ran a 12.98 in Zagreb to earn himself within striking distance of Jackson's 12.91 world record and his 12.95 Olympic record.

But the snap of cold that chilled the stadium in the evening heats surprised him.

"It was more like the Winter Olympics out there than the Summer," he remarked.

Cuba's Anler Garcia, tipped by Johnson as his main danger, won both his heats in comfortable style.

"I can win a medal in these Games," announced the 24-year-old. "I feel very well."

She won her first Olympic gold in the 100m fly, and never looked back.

"It all went pretty fast," she said. "My first gold medal gave me a taste and I said I wanted a second, and then I said I can do a third."

"I enjoyed the 100m fly the most, because that was my first gold medal ever and it felt very satisfying."

With a world record in each event to take her total for the year to 11, De Brujin said she felt there was nothing she can't do.

"The sky's the limit now," she said. "That is what I've been shown here. I thought my world records coming in here were so fast they couldn't be beaten."

"I've broken them, so the sky's the limit."

No doubt that's how Heyns felt when she set 11 records in the space of 11 weeks last year.

But the South African couldn't come close to those times this year. What's more, she didn't mind. At 25 she is ready to think of other things.

So is O'Neill, who plans to finally move to the same city as her husband, and Thompson, who has already been accepted to medical school.

Everything was different for De Brujin, whose first major international success was at the 1999 European Champion-

ships.

Repeating as an Olympic swimming champion is tough. Only five women have won the same event at two Games in a row.

One of them is Brooke Bennett, who defended her 800m free title and also captured the 400m free. Still only 20 and inexorably closing in on Janet Evans' venerable distance freestyle world records, Bennett is a likely candidate to be swimming in Athens.

Yana Klochkova, 18, completed a medley double, setting a world record in the 400m IM and added silver in the 800m free. Diana Mocanu, 16, won both women's backstroke titles.

Megan Quann, 16, survived the acid test failed by so many teenage breaststroke stars before her. She lived up to the expectations raised by her US Trials performance and won the 100m breaststroke, and left no doubt she'll be back for more.

"Coming into the Olympics, my expectations were two gold medals and to break two world records," Quann said after swimming in the world record-breaking 4x100m medley relay team.

"Here I have two gold and one world record. I have at least two more Olympics."

Chile were playing.

SYDNEY SIDELINES

SMILING SYDOR

Canada's Alison Sydor had to settle for fifth place in the women's mountain bike but was able to laugh off an incident-packed race.

The triple world champion made a brilliant start but then her chain came off during the first steep climb.

And twice Sydor got attacked by the magpies that disrupted the mountain biking event.

But Sydor was unfazed, saying: "That's just part of the Sydney flavour."

FATSO GETS ACCREDITATION

Fatso the Wombat is welcomed at the Sydney Olympics, International Olympic Committee (IOC) secretary general Francois Carrard said Sunday.

The mascot has earned cult status at the Games — the wombat is a cuddly toy with sewn-on excrement coming out of its behind and has been carried onto the medal podium by leading Australia's swimming stars.

But the mascot is not an officially licensed Olympic product and it was feared he would be banned from the venues.

But Carrard said: "I'm not aware of banning Fatso."

LUCKY HALL

Gary Hall, who won the 50m freestyle gold and anchored America's world record-setting 4x100m medley relay, nearly didn't swim at the Sydney Olympics.

Hall had refused to pay a fine that went with his three-month ban for marijuana use, which FINA said was a second offence. Hall argued that his

second positive test should be considered a first offence, because marijuana wasn't banned when he first tested positive at the Atlanta Olympics.

FINA warned him on August 22 that he risked missing the Games if he didn't pay, but Hall refused. US Swimming stepped in and paid the fine on condition Hall conduct some swimming clinics for children, and he agreed.

TEARS OF FRUSTRATION

Australian swimmer Grant Hackett was on top of the world after winning the 1,500-metres freestyle Saturday night, but just five days before winning gold he was holed up in his bedroom in the Olympic village crying his eyes out.

The 20-year-old said he had bawled for taking part in a heat, but that wasn't the way he wanted to win his first gold, according to Sydney's Daily Telegraph.

"I bawled my eyes out ... when I went back to my room. I'm not afraid to admit that at all. It was very hard to take," he said.

MO MEMORIES

A T-shirt, a hat, maybe. But a sweaty shoe?

A 20-year-old Australian jeweller is taking home a special souvenir from the Sydney Olympics: Maurice Greene's shoe.

After winning the 100m final Saturday, the American sprinter took off both his specially-designed Nike spikes and threw one into the crowd.

On the receiving end: Ben Harper, an apprentice jeweller from the city of Wagga Wagga.

followed that two minutes later by scooping in a rebound off goalkeeper Helen Clarke's pads.

Katrina Powell completed the tally in the 62nd with another superb field goal.

"Our heads were drooping a bit at half-time, but we changed our game plan and it worked very well," said Hudson, the competition's leading scorer with four goals.

Argentina's win over the Hockeyroos came after they led 2-1 at half-time.

Argentina, the only super league team without a point from the first round, took charge after a third-minute goal from Luciana Aymar.

The Dutch drew level in the 12th through Minke Snabers, but Auguista Garcia then scored on either side of the interval to seal Argentina's emphatic win.

China, who upset the Dutch and Germany in the first round, continued their impressive Olympic debut by forcing Spain to a draw.

"No one gave us a chance to move to the second round and now we have held our own against a top side," said Chinese manager Hu Jianguo.

Kakiasvilis 3rd in a row

SYDNEY, Sept 24: Kakiasvilis, one of the few athletes to have won Olympic golds for two different countries, added a third Games gold to his collection and a second for his adopted Greece with the narrowest of weightlifting wins on Sunday, reports AFP.

Kakiasvilis played a cat and mouse game with his nearest rival, teenaged sensation Szymon Kolecki of Poland and beat him to the gold in the 94kg category on lower body weight after both lifters totalled 405kg.

Russia's Alexei Petrov, one of the most controversial competitors in the sport who won gold four years ago in this category, was third on 402.5kg.



THE LAST OF THE BRAZILIANS: Brazil's Maicon (R) locked in a tussle with USA's Lorrie Fair during their semifinal clash of the women's football competition at Canberra yesterday. The Brazilian eyes followed their male compatriots in going out of the Olympics after a 0-1 defeat.

—AFP photo

Welcome happiness

GYMNASICS

SYDNEY, Sept 24: (AFP): Once she finally held on to the uneven bars through an entire routine, Svetlana Khorkina found she couldn't let go.

Moments after the 21-year-old Russian diva of the dismount defended her Olympic uneven bars gymnastics title here Sunday, she walked to the low bar, grabbed with both hands and kissed it as tears of joy moistened her cheeks.

Khorkina overcame the psychological strain of two costly falls on the same apparatus earlier in the week and a bad spill on an improperly low vaulting horse to gain a measure of redemption and her first gold medal at Sydney.

"I was absolutely quiet before," Khorkina said. "I wasn't very nervous. I was afraid once again the apparatus would be non-standard. But that was okay."

Khorkina won with a score of 9.862 with China's Ling Jie second at 9.837 and China's Yang Yun third at 9.787.

The 1997 Playboy pin-up girl was so traumatised by landing on her knees in a bad leap off a flawed vault in Thursday's all-around that she dropped out of the apparatus final. Her replacement, Russia's Elena Zamolodchikova, won gold.

"I was vaulting very badly and I didn't want to go," Khorkina said. "It was too soon. I need one more day for this. Then the pain will go. It would not have been good on my part if, well, it's still a problem to me, the vaulting."

Khorkina is the reigning world, Olympic and European champion on uneven bars. But she fell from them Tuesday to cost Russia team gold and again fell in the all-around Thursday after first taking her bad spill on the vault.

Khorkina's traumas here mirrored falls from the balance beam at last year's World Championships, one to cost Russia team gold and the other to drop her from the all-around lead to also-ran status.

After all that, it was no wonder she was irked when gymnastics officials discovered the vault she used was 2 cm too low.

"The mistakes I made in qualifying were not as a result of my activities. I was led into it," Khorkina said.

New guests

SYDNEY, Sept 24: Giant moths at the Olympic Stadium, magpies dive-bombing the mountain bikers, whales cruising the sailing course... now snakes have become the latest wildlife hazard at the Sydney Games, reports AFP.

Unseasonably warm weather has brought the reptiles slithering out of the undergrowth at equestrian events, the bike course and the rifle range.

"Keep to the track, snakes have been sighted," an announc