

Hoping to break free

Tennis

INTERNET, Paris

With his game in a shambles, defending French champion Albert Costa hopes to turn his fortunes around and rekindle the fire that made him the best clay-court grunter last year as the second Grand Slam of the season gets underway on Monday on the famous red clay.

After dropping the first set of the 2002 tournament in his first-round match to French teenage sensation Richard Gasquet, Costa went on to upset three-time champion Gustavo Kuerten in the round of 16. Armed with a never-say-die attitude, the 27-year-old right-handed Spaniard rolled on to capture the title, outlasting fellow-countryman Juan-Carlos Ferrero in the final.

Costa finished in the top 10 for the first time in his career and punctuated his amazing run with a qualifying berth for the Tennis

Masters Cup in Shanghai.

The Barcelona-resident's first three months of 2003 looked as strong, highlighted by a semifinal



ALBERT COSTA

showing at the Tennis Masters Series in Miami this past March where he defeated Guillermo Coria in the fourth-round and Swiss sensation Roger Federer in the quarters - saving three match points along the way - before losing

to eventual champion Andre Agassi.

Yet, Costa, who has notched 12 singles titles on the pro tour has had a difficult time maintaining his inspiration since the clay-court season kicked off. He has not reached one quarterfinal, his best result being a third-round defeat in Rome at the hands of eventual winner Felix Mantilla.

The Spanish baseliner, who has not won a tournament since his Roland Garros triumph last June, compiled an abysmal 7-5 record on clay this spring season, a far cry for someone who had gone 28-8 in 2002 and whose lifetime career average on clay is 240-108.

It remains to be seen whether Costa will be able to pick up his game and produce the form he displayed last year at the "French," breaking down the resistance of his competitors along the way. He will play against a qualifier in the first round, a hurdle he should clear. But things might get trickier with world number Lleyton Hewitt, former champion Gustavo Kuerten and young standout Richard Gasquet all in his side of the draw.

FORM-GUIDE (MEN)

LLEYTON HEWITT x1

Australian - 22: best performance at French Open - quarterfinals in 2001

The world number one is still struggling to come to terms with the rigours of clay-court tennis and to date he has been an easy victim for the European and South American specialists on the surface. Sounded less than confident this week playing team tennis in Dusseldorf, but his never-say-die attitude should at least seem him into the quarterfinals.

ANDRE AGASSI x2

American - 22: best performance at French Open - winner in 1999

Got off to a tremendous start to the year by cruising to the Australian Open title and regained the No 1 spot with back-to-back wins in the first round in Rome and withdrew from Hamburg. Lack of clay-court play unlikely to unsettle the most experienced and savvy competitor in the men's game and he is a real threat to make it half-way to the Grand Slam.

JUAN CARLOS FERRERO x3

Spaniard - 23: best performance at French Open - runner-up in 2002

Had a great chance to win here last year, and inexplicably lost in the final to journeyman Albert Costa. Ferrero as usual has constructed his year around being at his peak in Paris. Started well with impressive wins in Monte Carlo and Valencia. If he is fully fit and able to last two weeks of gruelling play, he will no doubt be a major threat.

CARLOS MOYA x4

Spaniard - 26: best perf at French Open - winner in 1998

Moya looked set to become a dominant figure for years to come in the French Open when he won as a 21-year-old in 1998, but curiously he has struggled to make his mark at Roland Garros since then.

ROGER FEDERER x5

Swiss - 21: Best performance at Swiss Open - quarterfinal 2001

Has been probably the form player of the last few weeks winning in Munich and reaching the final in Rome. Most experts say it is only a matter of time before he wins a Major and he is capable of triumphing on any surface including clay and grass. The question will be whether he can maintain his attacking style of play to the highest levels against a succession of safety-first claycourters.

SEBASTIEN GROSJEAN x15

French - 24: Best performance at French Open - semi-final 2001

The French No 1 is among the most naturally talented players on the circuit and he will have passionate support from the Roland Garros faithfully desperate for the first home win in the men's singles since Yannick Noah's triumph in 1983.

GUILLERMO CORIA x7

Argentine - 21: Best performance at French Open - third round 2002

The boyish-looking 21-year-old led an unprecedented Argentine sweep of the semi-finals at the Hamburg Masters Series event and went on to lift the title, the biggest of his career to date.

GUSTAVO KUERTEN x15

Brazilian - 26: Best performance at French Open - winner 2001, 2000 and 1997

The 'King of Clay' has lost some of his aura since his last win two years ago as injuries have started to take their toll on his physique.

Has made a big effort to get back to the top this year and there have been glimpses of the old Kuerten.

FORM GUIDE (WOMEN)

SERENA WILLIAMS x1

United States - 22: best performance at French Open - winner 2002

World number one Serena is bidding for her sixth Grand Slam title and fifth in a row after claiming the Serena Slam by beating older sister Venus in the final of the last four Grand Slams, beginning her dominance at Roland Garros last year and then adding the Wimbledon, US and Australian Open titles.

KIM CLIJSTERS x2

Belgium - 19: best performance at French Open - runner-up 2001

World number two Kim Clijsters is leading the chasing pack and succeeding in bridging the gap with the Williams sisters, and could go all the way to winning her first Grand Slam title after winning the season-ending championship title and holding two match points before losing the Australian Open semifinal to Serena in January.

VENUS WILLIAMS x3

United States - 22: best performance at French Open - runner-up 2002

The holder of 29 WTA titles, Venus has seen a drop in form of late culminating in a pulled a stomach muscle before the German Open earlier this month.

JUSTINE HENIN-HARDENNE x4

Belgium - 20: best performance at French Open - semifinalist 2001

Beat world number one Serena Williams to take the Charleston title last month and overcame the world number two Clijsters to win the German Open title earlier this month.

AMELIE MAURESMO x5

France - 23: best performance at French Open - 4th round 2000, 2002

Serena and Venus Williams know they had better watch out for home favourite Amelie Mauresmo when the French Open draw is made.

LINDSAY DAVENPORT x6

United States - 26: best performance at French Open - runner-up 2002

An outsider for the title, tennis waif Hantuchova, expected to make up for the absence of Russian beauty Anna Kournikova, should add some glamour to the courts of Roland Garros despite rumours of the world number nine's struggle with her form due to anorexia.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer



Serena hungrier than ever

Tennis

REUTERS, Paris

"My fitness is unbelievable right now," she said on Sunday after a brief practice session on the Parisian clay.

"I just don't get tired. I've been really working on my fitness so I am in really good shape right now...I am happy."

The news will come as no comfort to anybody looking to dethrone the American phenomenon, especially as she is now forming something of a love affair with the tricky slow surface.

"It is not difficult for me to play on clay at all...I love the clay," she smiled.

"But as she prepares to slide into action at Stade Roland Garros on Monday, Serena is happy just the way she is."

A feminine first for Morocco!

Tennis

REUTERS, Paris

Bahia Mouttassine will become the first Moroccan woman to play in the main draw of the French Open next week after beating China's Jie Zheng in the final round of qualifying.

"It has been very hard to get this far, I still haven't realised what I've done," she beamed as she left court following Saturday's 7-6, 6-4 win.

Her first round appearance on Parisian clay will not be the 23-year-old's first Grand Slam showing, though, having won through to the Australian Open first round in 2002 before losing to Spaniard Anabel Medina Garrigues in three sets.

"But playing in Paris is so much more exciting than competing in Australia," she smiled, "I'm at home here, all my friends come to cheer me on. This is the best tournament in the world."

Mouttassine said her victories in qualifying meant more than simply sporting triumphs.

"It proves that it's possible to be an Arab woman, a Muslim, and still compete at the very highest level in international sport," she said.

"One does not preclude the other. Which is why I'm disappointed that Selma Sfar (from Tunisia) was knocked out in the second qualifying round."

Ranked 159th in the world, Mouttassine does not yet know the identity of her first round opponent but says: "I'll be giving my all."

"I love this tournament and I've got so many supporters out there

Preliminary squad

FROM PAGE 13

starts on July 6.

Meanwhile, steps are underway to increase the number of cricketers in Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB) pay roll. The number of players to be offered contract might double from the present six.

"Hopefully we will be able to finalise the matter over the next few days. We are likely to increase the number to 10 or 12," said Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) advisor and Cricket Committee chairman Mahbubul Anam yesterday.

An outsider for the title, tennis waif Hantuchova, expected to make up for the absence of Russian beauty Anna Kournikova, should add some glamour to the courts of Roland Garros despite rumours of the world number nine's struggle with her form due to anorexia.

New age heroes

REUTERS, Duesseldorf

While Andre Agassi will carry most of America's hopes at the French Open, it is the new breed, led by Andy Roddick and James Blake, who will command much of the attention at Roland Garros over the next fortnight.

And though they have yet to break through with a Grand Slam victory, there seems little doubt that the young Americans are ready to make an impact on the biggest stage.

Roddick, 21, whose huge serve and forehand have already taken him to world number six, has always shown the talent to suggest he would be dangerous at grand slam events.

Those who doubted his mental strength will have been impressed by his marathon victory over Younes El Aynaoui in the quarter-finals at the Australian Open in January, a match he won 21-19 in the final set.

Fatigue and Rainer Schuettler got the better of him in the semi-finals but, for the first time outside the US, he proved himself to be a true contender for the biggest prizes.

Blake, 23, who along with Mardy Fish, Graydon Oliver and old hand Todd Martin formed the US side at the World Team Cup in Duesseldorf, the week before Paris, has shown signs of making the big breakthrough.



PHOTO: COURTESY

Mosharraf Hossain, MP, gives away the trophy to the winners of the Hosaf football tournament in Feni on Friday. Chairman of Hosaf Group of Companies Moazzam Hossain attended the ceremony.

Clay tensions surface

Tennis

INTERNET, Paris

higher than on other surfaces, so players have to hit the ball at shoulder-level.

Experts on the surface, such as former champion Gustavo Kuerten, hold their racket differently to the likes of Tim Henman and Sampras to cope with it.

"Tim Henman may adapt his grip on the racket a little bit when he plays on clay, but it's not the same as someone who plays that way all the time," said Hutchins.

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"