

Federer, Ferrero on track

Australian Open
AP, Melbourne

Roger Federer and Juan Carlos Ferrero had hard-fought victories Wednesday to set up a semifinal showdown for the world's top ranking at the Australian Open.

Federer will become No. 1 for the first time if he beats Ferrero, who needs to win the tournament to regain the top spot that he held for eight weeks last year.

"I think my math is good enough to figure that out," Federer said, referring to the complicated points ranking system.

Current No. 1 Andy Roddick was assured of slipping in the rankings after being upset by Marat Safin in the quarterfinals on Tuesday.

Ferrero continued his run for his second Grand Slam by defeating Morocco's Hicham Arazi 6-1, 7-6, 7-6. Second-seeded Federer beat No. 8 David Nalbandian 7-5, 6-4, 5-7, 6-3.

Second-seeded Kim Clijsters aggravated an ankle injury while beating Anastasia Myskina, leaving her questionable for Thursday's match against Patty Schnyder of Switzerland. Schnyder advanced to her first Grand Slam semifinal with a 7-5, 6-3 victory over American Lisa Raymond.

Also on Thursday's semifinals schedule are top-ranked Justine

Grand Slam title, Clijsters beat Myskina 6-2, 7-6, recovering after a medical timeout in the second set.

Clijsters injured her left ankle at the Hopman Cup and was sidelined for two weeks leading into the Open. She said she would ice it, take painkillers and get it taped before deciding in the morning if she can play.

"I'm going to have a week off after this anyway, so I might as well go for it and give myself a shot," Clijsters said. "But, on the other hand, if I can't walk tomorrow, it's stupid to go out there."

Martina Navratilova, 47, took another step toward her 10th Grand Slam mixed doubles title when she and India's Leander Paes -- the defending champions -- beat Australians Paul Hanley and Trudi Musgrave 6-3, 3-6, 7-6 in the quarterfinals.

Federer's victory gained him some revenge. Nalbandian beat the 22-year-old Swiss player in the fourth round of the Australian and U.S. Opens last year and had a 5-1 edge in head-to-head meetings.

Federer didn't feel the match lived up to expectations, especially with him committing 55 unforced errors. Still, he did enough to win.

At 5-5 in the first set, Federer faced double break point but ripped four straight aces to hold.

"That was maybe the key of the match," Federer said.

He broke Nalbandian for the set in the next game -- the first set that



PHOTO: AFP

Kim Clijsters of Belgium pumps her fist after beating Russian Anastasia Myskina in their singles quarter-final match of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday.

on by taking the third set, but Federer broke Nalbandian's next service game to go up 2-0 in the fourth. He rode the advantage to finish off the match with his 20th ace and a serve that Nalbandian hit long.

Ferrero was at his best in the key points in outlasting Arazi, even though he was getting tired, his injured groin muscles were aching and Arazi had him sprinting all over the court.

Arazi, ranked 51st, earlier knocked off 25th-seeded Albert Costa and No. 10 Mark Philippoussis. But he came out cold against Ferrero, who won seven straight games spanning the first and second sets, losing only nine points.

In the second set, Arazi came back from 0-2 and fended off two set points with Ferrero serving at 5-4 to break and even the score at 5-5. He led the tiebreaker 6-3 before Ferrero ran off six straight points to take the set.

With Ferrero looking increasingly weary and not moving as well, Arazi broke him for a 4-3 lead in the third set and had a set point on Ferrero's next serve. Ferrero won the game, then broke Arazi to tie the set at 5-5.

"Today was a good test, and I

think I passed, I need some rest today and tomorrow," Ferrero said. "I'm very motivated to get (No. 1 spot) again. I'm playing very solid."

Clijsters, a fan favorite as the fiancée of Australian star Lleyton Hewitt, lost the first four games of the second set against Myskina and needed treatment for her left ankle after holding in the fifth.

She won five of the next six games and had two match points on the sixth-seeded Myskina's serve in the 12th before the Russian held to force a tiebreaker.

Clijsters had three more match points in the tiebreaker and saved two set points before Myskina's backhand shot drifted wide to close out the match.

"I was very happy I could pull it off in two sets, otherwise it would have been hard," she said.

Raymond, a third-round winner over Venus Williams, is 0-5 in her career against Schnyder. The 30-year-old American had 44 unforced errors and only 24 winners.

"I don't think that I've been this disappointed losing a match," Raymond said. "I really, really thought that I had a good shot of really having a breakthrough here."



PHOTO: AFP

Spaniard Juan Carlos Ferrero celebrates after defeating Hicham Arazi of Morocco in their men's singles quarterfinal match of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday.

Henin-Hardenne against 32nd-seeded Fabiola Zuluaga, and defending men's champion Andre Agassi against former top-ranked Safin.

A semifinalist in all four majors last season but still without a

the Argentine lost in five matches.

It soon became two. With Nalbandian serving at 4-5, Federer went ahead at 0-40. Nalbandian saved two break points before hitting a forehand into the net.

Nalbandian put some pressure

Mahmud keeps

FROM PAGE 13 media not to put pressure on Mahmud, who has already gone through a lot.

"We made an earnest request and Mahmud has agreed to withdraw his resignation. We think he has left with a number of years as a player to contribute in our cricket," said Mahbub while confirming the latest development just after a press briefing in connection with the ICC Under-19 World Cup that will be held in Bangladesh from February 15.

But Mahbub was reluctant to talk about the frenzied activities that took place since the team was announced and Mahmud resigned on Monday.

"I will request everybody not to embarrass him any more. Since he has agreed to play and contributed so much to Bangladesh cricket, he should be encouraged to do so in the days to come."

Real test awaits Agassi

Australian Open
REUTERS, Melbourne

Champion Andre Agassi's bid for a fifth Australian Open title faces its first real test on Thursday when he squares off against giant Russian Marat Safin.

Agassi has strolled through to the semifinals without dropping a set and the odds are heavily stacked in his favour that he will beat Safin.

However, the American is worried about his Russian opponent and with good reason. Safin blows hot and cold but at the moment he is on fire.

"He's got a big serve and that worries me," Agassi said.

"He's six-five (1.96 metres) so that always tends to worry me a little bit too.

Safin said his punishing road to the semi-finals has given the American a huge advantage. While Agassi has played less than 14 sets after his quarterfinal opponent Sebastian Grosjean retired hurt, Safin has played 22.

He was stretched to the limit in a marathon encounter with Todd Martin in the third round before surviving an epic five-set match with world number one Andy Roddick in the quarterfinals.

"I will have to be really fresh against Andre if I want to have a chance to beat him because he has played not even half the time I spent on the court," said Safin, runner-up here two years ago.

"There are some things you can improve and just take. If I analyse

the situation I think I could play a little different against Andre, not better, different."

Safin's career appeared to be on the slide last year when he suffered a series of injuries and slumped to 86 in the world rankings. The Russian's form this week suggests he is back.

His game is based around his ferocious serve and the power of his groundstrokes and when he is at his best, he is almost impossible to stop.

Agassi knows the driving force behind players on the comeback trail after he himself staged possibly the most remarkable comeback in tennis history to be challenging for grand slams at 33.

However, the Las Vegas showman employs different strategies, wearing his opponents down both mentally and physically.

Aus to try all-rounders

AFP, Melbourne

Australia will have one eye on the finals when they go into their triangular VB Series one-day cricket tournament match against Zimbabwe at the Melbourne Cricket Ground here on Thursday.

In an effort to settle on a bowling line-up before the finals series begins, the home side will bring in all-rounders Ian Harvey and Andy Bichel in place of batsman Andrew Symonds and pace bowler Jason Gillespie for the day-night match.

"It probably means we go into the game one specialist batsman down, but it gives a few of the all-rounders a real chance to have a bit of a hit," captain Ricky Ponting said.

Australia leads the tri-nation series with one defeat in six games so far. The home side will meet India in the best-of-three finals series, which will start here on February 6. The other side, Zimbabwe, have yet to record a win and cannot qualify for the finals.

After Thursday's game, Australia plays its last pool match against India in Perth on Sunday before the finals begin.

Ponting said Australia probably would not play four fast bowlers in the finals series, meaning performances in the next two games will be vital for selection.

SQUADS

AUSTRALIA (from): Ricky Ponting (captain), Michael Bevan, Andy Bichel, Michael Clarke, Jason Gillespie, Brad Haddin, Ian Harvey, Matthew Hayden, Brad Hogg, Brett Lee, Damien Martyn, Andrew Symonds, Brad Williams.

ZIMBABWE (from): Heath Streak (captain), Andy Blynnat, Stuart Carlisle, Dion Ebrahim, Sean Ervine, Grant Flower, Travis Friend, Douglas Hondo, Stuart Matsikenyeri, Ray Price, Vusi Sibanda, Tatenda Taibu.

Aussies too decide later

AFP, Sydney

Australia's cricket authority will visit Zimbabwe in March before making a decision on whether accede to a government request that it cancel the upcoming tour of the troubled African country, officials said Wednesday.

But in a statement after an official call to cancel the May tour in protest against the policies of Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe, Cricket Australia made it clear safety and security were its only considerations.

"We are aware of the difficult situation in Zimbabwe, just as we are aware that there are diverse political, social and economic issues in other countries we visit," Cricket Australia chief executive officer James Sutherland said.

"Our long-standing position is that we are cricketers, and our visits have no other symbolism than that."

He said the authority supports the International Cricket Council future tours plan strategy, which requires all Test-playing nations to play each other at home at least once every five years as a mechanism to global sport.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said earlier that going ahead with the tour would "send the wrong message" to both Zimbabwe and neighboring South Africa, a strong Mugabe ally.

"We'd rather it didn't go ahead, obviously the Zimbabwe government would be pleased if it did," Downer told commercial radio.

Prime Minister John Howard spearheaded moves to suspend Zimbabwe from the 54-member Commonwealth after Mugabe was re-elected last March in polls widely seen as fraudulent.

Howard and British counterpart Tony Blair successfully countered efforts led by South Africa and Nigeria to obtain Zimbabwe's re-admission to the Commonwealth during a group summit meeting in Nigeria in December.

PCB to ask

FROM PAGE 13

SCHOOL: 29/10 in 11.5 overs (Babu 2-8, Selim 2-9, Shamim 1-2, Dipu 1-7)

NATUN PALTAN LINES SCHOOL: 32/1 in 3.2 overs (Mam 13, Shaon 10)

Result: Mir Hazaribagh won by nine wickets.

AK HIGH SCHOOL: 194/10 in 32.2 overs (Jewel 52, Shahin 45, Abul 4-26, Manik 4-39)

ADHUNIK BIDDYALAYA: 79/10 in 16.2 overs (Rabin 22, Mustafa 3-14, Jewel 3-23)

Result: AK High School won by 115 runs.

KAJALPAR HIGH SCHOOL: 126/10 in 32.3 overs (Shakil 37, Soheli 22, Salam 3-26, Sajib 3-27, Jibon 2-16)

PARADISE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL: 127/7 in 30.3 overs (Johny 26, Jewel 23, Rana 2-23, Karim 2-28)

Result: Paradise International School won by three wickets.

DHAKA COLLEGIATE SCHOOL: 62/9 in 20 overs (Ariful 3-9, Mahbub 2-9, Kamruzzaman 2-15)

JATRABARI BIDDYUT UNNAYAN BOARD HIGH

It still haunts them

Cricket

REUTERS, London

It's easy to make enemies in Hyderabad.

Just walk down the street, any street, and ask somebody, ask anybody, where Vangipurappu Venkata Sai Laxman was on March 23, 2003.

At best, the query will be met with a glacial stare (if glacial stares are possible in southern India) and, at worst, with a sharp punch to the nose.

The answer, of course, is that Laxman was not at The Wanderers, and not playing in the World Cup final.

The decision to leave the elegant right-hander out of the World Cup squad instead he was packed off on an India A tour to West Indies seemed questionable at the time.

Today it must rank among the greatest selectorial gaffes of all time.

India's wise men had opted instead for Dinesh Mongia, who came back from the World Cup with an average of 20, scored at a pedestrian strike rate, with the further contribution of a few overs of unspectacular left-arm spin.

The team cruised magnificently to the final but, when the going got tough, India got nowhere, imploding instead against the mighty Australians by a ghastly 125 runs.

Laxman does not like to dwell on the matter.

Asked about his cup omission by The Observer newspaper, he replied: "It really hurts, still hurts, and some of the pain will stay with me for the rest of my career."

There has at least been some degree of revenge.

The man from Hyderabad, gifted with fluid wrist joints and an ability to hit a cricket ball preposterously late and on the up, has repeatedly taken out his frustrations on Brett Lee and the other Australian bowlers.

Laxman, indeed, is remarkable among batsmen in that he seems to relish playing against the world's best side.



VVS LAXMAN

His miraculous Indian record of 281 against Australia in 2001 set a tone which has continued in recent months.

In his last Test innings against them he harvested 178, meaning that four of Laxman's five highest Test scores have come off Australian bowlers.

Four of his five one-day hundreds have also come against the same opposition, including two in his last three visits to the crease.

In Test cricket, Laxman averages a shade over 47 but against Australia, he scores 63.52 a visit. In

one-dayers, his overall average is 33.08 but against the World Cup winners it is 54.53.

That pattern is truly extraordinary.

Sachin Tendulkar, Brian Lara and Rahul Dravid do well against the world champions, but no better than they do against all other sides.

South Africans Jacques Kallis and Herschelle Gibbs in particular, as well as Pakistan's Inzamamul Haq, have never lived up to their batting billing against Australia.

Gibbs's Test average is 49.12 but he only scores 32.38 per visit against the men wearing the Baggy Green.

Only England captain Michael Vaughan comes close to matching Laxman.

The 29-year-old Indian, who spent much of his early career in and out of the team as the selectors fretted over his inconsistency, next plays Australia on Sunday in Perth, seeking a third consecutive one-day century.

Only three men have ever achieved the feat before.

The odds are almost in favour, if you listen to Tendulkar.

Batting with Laxman in the fourth Test in Sydney last month, Tendulkar scored 241 not out to his partner's 178 but he was in no doubt which innings merited centre-stage.

"It was a treat to watch," Tendulkar said. "I certainly wasn't going to try what he was doing."

Another century on Sunday and the population of Hyderabad will celebrate in the streets, while former India World Cup selectors will remain behind locked doors, refusing all calls.

Three Indians to check security in Pakistan

Cricket

AFP, undated

India's cricket chiefs on Wednesday named a three-member delegation to assess the security situation in Pakistan ahead of the national team's ice-breaking Test tour there in March.

Senior police official and security expert Yashovardhan Azad will join cricket officials Ratnakar Shetty and Amrit Mathur in the delegation due to visit Pakistan in early February, according to Jagmohan Dalmiya, president of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI).

"The three will assess the security and other arrangements for not only the Indian team, but also the accompanying media and fans," Dalmiya told reporters here.

"The itinerary for the series will be finalised only after the delegation submits its report."

India is scheduled to play three Tests and five one-day internationals during the tour, their first full tour of Pakistan since 1989.

Azad, elder brother of former cricket international Kirti Azad, was given charge of the security of the Pakistani team on its last tour of India in early 1999.

Shetty is the joint secretary of the BCCI, while Mathur is its media manager and a former administrative manager of the national team.

The decision to send an advance security team follows media reports that the players, currently touring Australia, were worried about their safety during the tour.

"We get a feeling they are happy to just have the tour and send us off," an unnamed senior player was quoted as saying recently.

"There seems to be more talk of television revenues rather than security which is disturbing. We

don't mind going at all but feel everything is being rushed."

There were reports that bizarre off-field events are ruining the build-up to the ice-breaking series as officials from both sides struggle to finalise the schedule.

The series was announced with much fanfare in October following a thaw in political tensions between the South Asian arch-rivals.

But three months later, neither the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) nor the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) have been able to draw up an itinerary for the tour scheduled to be held in March-April.

Dalmiya, however, stressed that the safety of the players was of prime importance. "We have to take everything into account, that is why I say there has not been a delay in finalising the itinerary," he said.

"The tour process takes time. We want a perfect tour without any incidents."

It was reported in the media that the itinerary had not been finalised because of differences over playing in Karachi and Peshawar, two centres that were boycotted by South Africa last year due to security concerns.

It is said that Pakistan wanted the tour to start in Karachi, but the Indians preferred Lahore.

While there was agreement in playing Test matches at these two major centres, the Indians reportedly wanted the remaining Test to be played in Faisalabad or Rawalpindi instead of the north-western city of Peshawar.

Media reports on Wednesday said a Pakistani marketing man Zahid Bashir was in India negotiating with television companies, including the government-run Doordarshan, to cover the series.

But it appears Bashir has no

locus standi to deal on behalf of the PCB, since he was sacked as its marketing manager on January 2 soon after former diplomat Shahrayar Khan took over as PCB chief.

"The Pakistan board is not obliged to fulfill any obligations or deals Bashir may have made in India," PCB spokesman Samiul Hasan said.

The PCB insists it is not even seeking to sell TV rights for the series since there is already an agreement in place with the Dubai-based TEN Sports channel, which holds the rights for all international cricket being played in Pakistan.

A political worry

FROM PAGE 13

the next two to three days," he said.

"We will talk with all the political parties if required because it is our challenge as a nation to hold the meet smoothly. We have already sent letters to different political parties and concerned agencies requesting their cooperation," said Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) President Ali Asghar.

Asghar informed that the state-run Bangladesh Television (BTV) would telecast nine matches and the inaugural function live.

"The Global Cricket Corporation (GCC) has sold the television rights to SONY-Max and BTV will buy the telecast rights from them," said Asghar.

BCB's cricket committee chairman Mahbubul Anam informed that the Nepal cricket team will be the first to arrive for the World Cup. The squad of the associate member country is expected to reach Dhaka tomorrow. They will play five practice matches against the Bangladesh Under 19 team leading up to the competition.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

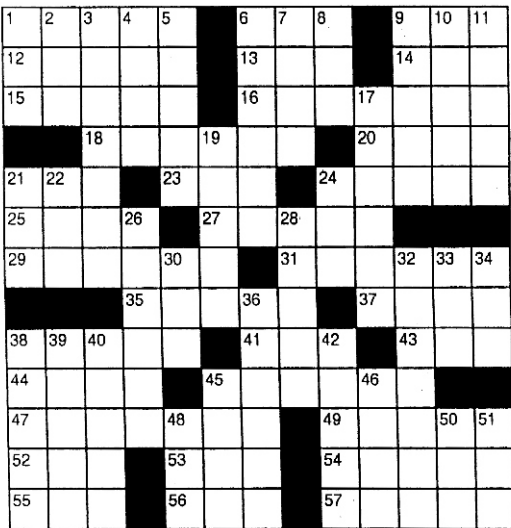
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Solution time: 25 mins.

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CRYPTOQUIP

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J F A Z Y B N X Q I, K B W Z U R Z I

C I M Y C I M I X Y Z S I - B U -

Q J S N R I M D I N ?

Yesterday's Cryptogram: IF A GYMNAST IS RUDE AND IMPERTINENT, IS HE THUS DISPLAYING A FLIPPANT ATTITUDE?

Today's Cryptogram Clue: Z equals H

The Cryptogram is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Big win

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