



Nicole Vaidisova of the Czech Republic stretches to make a return against compatriot Lucie Safarova in their quarterfinal match at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Tuesday.

Vaidisova sets up idol meet

AFP, Melbourne

Australian Open 10th seed Nicole Vaidisova set up a semi-final clash with her childhood idol Serena Williams Tuesday after winning an all-Czech quarter-final against Lucie Safarova.

Vaidisova's downed the unseeded Safarova 6-1, 6-4 after her compatriot was unable to reproduce the form that dumped defending champion Amelie Mauresmo out of the tournament earlier this week.

Vaidisova, 17, the youngest player left in the tournament, was an awestruck 11-year-old when she saw seven-time Grand Slam champion Williams, 25, practicing at Nick Bollettieri's tennis academy in the semis.

"I was definitely a big fan of hers, admired the way she played," she said.

But Vaidisova said she would not be intimidated facing the big American.

"I don't think I'll be going out there scared. But of course (I have) a lot of respect for what she's done."

Vaidisova, ranked 12 in the world, said it was difficult to play against her friend Safarova in the quarterfinal.

"I've had some tough matches, a compatriot in the quarter-finals is always tough but I'm so happy I'm

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Sinking feeling for Fish

AFP, Melbourne

The subject of his abject straight sets defeat won't be a topic of discussion for Mardy Fish when he next bumps into Andy Roddick.

Unseeded Fish was hammered 6-2, 6-2, 6-2 in his first-ever Grand Slam quarterfinal in just 87 minutes by his mate in one of the most lopsided men's matches at this stage of the tournament.

Roddick, who went to high school with Fish, did not play up his win and had a few consoling words as the pair shook hands over the net at the end.

It was a numbing experience for the 25-year-old Fish, who has fought his way back from two operations on a career-threatening injured left wrist.

"Maybe we'd prefer to play each other in the final. We've had some real good matches," Fish said.

"This one was probably the most lopsided match we've ever had. It's ironic it comes on one of the biggest stages we've played on."

"It's a little bit tougher to play friends. You want to get fired up out there. I'm sure Andy's obviously stoked to make the semis, but he didn't show much emotion."

"I'm sure that was because he

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SERENA WINS AN EPIC Men's semifinal humdinger

Australian Open
The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

AFP, Melbourne

The ultimate competitor Serena Williams upset the form book to blitz into the Australian Open semi-finals Tuesday as Roger Federer and Andy Roddick set up a showdown against each other.

Seven-time Grand Slam champion Williams, who won here in 2003 and 2005, staged an amazing fightback to down Israel 16th seed Shahar Peer 3-6, 6-2, 8-6 in an epic battle and will meet Czech teenager Nicole Vaidisova in the semis.

Federer, the top seed, was made the sweat in the second set of his quarter-final with seventh seed Tommy Robredo of Spain, before he re-established order to win 6-3, 7-6 (7/2), 7-5.

"It was a tough straight sets win," said the Swiss world number one, who was playing in front of his parents and sisters, who jetted in from Europe.

"I had to work really hard tonight. It was breezy so we had to adjust."

Federer established a new

Open-Era record of 11 consecutive Grand Slam semi-final appearances in beating Robredo, overtaking Ivan Lendl.

He has yet to drop a set and has a 12-1 record against Roddick, but he knows the American is playing well.

"I'm really looking forward to playing Andy. He's in good form so I'll need to be at my best."

It was a simpler exercise for Roddick against the unseeded Mardy Fish, wrapping up a 6-2, 6-2, 6-2 win in one hour 27 minutes, just four minutes longer than it took Williams to get through her third set.

Williams rallied from a set down to lead 4-1 in the final set before her gritty opponent, the first Israeli woman to reach a Grand Slam quarter-final, pulled level.

The lanky world number 12 maintained the pressure and put her big-match experience to good use to end Safarova's challenge after one hour 11 minutes.

"Definitely very, very happy and excited," said Vaidisova, who is the youngest player left in the tournament.

"The first Grand Slam of the year, you have some off season. You don't know how you're going to come back. But I had a great start to the year and I just keep improving," she said.

"It's exciting to come through. I'm just happy to be out there and competing. I feel absolutely no pressure. Definitely ready to create

Forever a Czech

AFP, Melbourne

Like Maria Sharapova, Nicole Vaidisova is a product of the Nick Bollettieri Academy in Florida and has developed an American accent, but she bristles at suggestions she is no longer a true Czech.

Unlike Sharapova, who was born in Russia but hasn't lived there for years, the 17-year-old still resides in Prague and says it will always be home.

"I think in every single sense I am Czech. I think deep down I'm Czech. Czech Republic is home for me," she said.

"Every time I go back to Prague, I try to go as much as possible. That's home. Family is there. Everybody is there."

Vaidisova made the Australian Open semi-finals Tuesday with a straight sets victory over compatriot Lucie Safarova and will now meet seven-time Grand Slam champion Serena Williams.

While winning a Grand Slam is high on her wish list, her dream is to play for her country at the Olympics.

"I'm very proud to play for Czech Republic. I would love to play in the Olympics, I didn't get a chance last time."

The multilingual teenager, who speaks Czech, German, English and French, was actually born in Germany and lived there till she was six.

Introduced to tennis by her mother Riana around that time, she was sent to the Bollettieri academy to fine tune her skills after showing promise.

While insisting she is Czech through and through, she admits the American influence has rubbed off.

"Of course, you get the thinking. You speak with them a lot. You get a

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Serena not egotistic

AFP, Melbourne

Serena Williams is keeping her ego in check after making the Australian Open semi-finals, saying she doesn't want to be "like some of those celebrities walking around, just so full of themselves".

The seven-time Grand Slam champion said she would be deaf to the plaudits likely to rain down on her after she confounded the critics and made the last four as an unseeded player ranked 81 in the world following an injury lay-off.

"I don't read anything," she said. "One time, I think it was '99, I read this article. It was really good and I was like 'oh, yeah! I'm the bomb'."

"I just got too headstrong. I don't want to be like some of those celebrities walking around, just so full of themselves."

"I always want to be down to earth, want to be a person like when you meet them, they're the same person that you think of them in the article or something."

The 25-year-old Williams, who won the Australian Open in 2003 and 2005, said she would soak up the praise after she retires from tennis.

"When my career is over, I've been saving a lot of articles, I'll go back and read them," she said. "I don't want to be big headed (so) I can barely get through the door."

She said earlier in the week that she had also reined in her ego on

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Is Premiership the best?

Football

AFP, Paris

Is English club football the best in the world? That was the debate in highly respected French sports newspaper L'Equipe on Tuesday, sparked by a pair of excuses from the bosses of underachieving teams.

Chelsea's Jose Mourinho lamented his lack of fit centre-halves in excusing his side's 2-0 defeat at Liverpool on Saturday before suggesting it would be easier to win the Champions League than the Premiership in his predicament.

"That shows you how hard it is to win in England," complained Wenger.

But while L'Equipe accepts that the English league is unsurpassed for entertainment and riches, it questioned England's claim to have the best league.

"The Premiership is very, very rich, the football is spectacular, as shown by Manchester United and Arsenal these last few weeks," said L'Equipe.

"It's spectacular but that's about as far as it goes."

It points out that while England produced the Champions League

winners in 2005 (Liverpool) and finalists in both last season's European tournaments - Arsenal in the Champions League and Middlesbrough in the UEFA Cup - English club's success in Europe since being allowed back into the competitions in 1990-91 have been left in the shade by Spain and Italy.

Spain have won five Champions League crowns and Italy three while England sits joint third with Germany on two.

Italy have won 11 European trophies in that period, with Spain claiming nine and England again in third on six - helped largely by three victories in the now defunct and previously derided Cup Winners' Cup.

England also sits only third in UEFA club rankings with 63,486 points compared to Italy's 66,731 and Spain's 72,748 - although the top three are well clear of the rest, headed by France and Germany.

"Is the Premiership an irresistible seductive? Certainly. A model? That's not so sure," concludes L'Equipe.



Real Madrid's Brazilian strikers Ronaldo (R) and Robinho (C) share a light moment in training as coach Fabio Capello looks on at their training ground Madrid on Tuesday.

Lofty yet troubled Real

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid are a club in crisis according to many observers, held in tension selling their most famous players in the belief they are over the hill. But the criticism hurts less when you are (joint) top of the league, which is where Real will enter the second half of the season after Sunday's 1-0 win at Mallorca, courtesy of Jose Antonio Reyes' brilliant free-kick which rescued an unconvincing showing.

A run of poor performances had led neutral observers and club insiders alike to conclude the nine-times European champions need radical surgery.

Painful for the veterans as it is, that process is already under way under disciplinarian coach Fabio Capello.

Never a respecter of reputations, Capello has discarded fading stars David Beckham and Ronaldo.

Real's constant craving for offloading and buying players by the half dozen is a recipe which hasn't worked since Beckham arrived in July 2003 as the final 'galactic' piece in the jigsaw.

In the four intervening years Real

have proved that money cannot buy success, although Chelsea might disagree, given the English champions' current need for a new centre half or two.

Ever since Beckham's injection into a team that had just won its 29th league title, the cash-rich Spaniards have consistently proved to be worth less than the sum of their parts, left floundering by a resurgent Barcelona at home and looking distinctly ordinary in Europe.

But all the talk of crisis may prove uncalled for after Reyes' goal made it a three-way tie at the top between Capello's men, Barcelona and Sevilla.

The Catalans have a game in hand but have been inconsistent in recent weeks and did not sparkle Sunday in seeing off tailenders Gimnastic Tarragona, while Seville have taken just one point in three matches as their Andalusian fire has started to fade.

If Seville had caught a cold in those three outings Real had looked positively ill before Christmas after a disastrous 3-0 home pounding by Recreativo Huelva and follow-up 2-0 reverse at Deportivo La Coruna.

But if the league table doesn't lie, the title is up for grabs.

"We deserved our win and physically we are in good shape physically and psychologically," Capello insisted after beating a Mallorca

side which a week earlier had won in Seville.

In a pointed remark after previous criticism of the squad by himself and chairman Ramon Calderon, Capello added: "I liked the players' attitude."

Capello's new broom approach - out with the big names, in with youngsters such as Miguel Torres, who, as in the previous single-goal win over Zaragoza, excelled at the back in the absence of Roberto Carlos -- seems to be working with Reyes and newcomer Gonzalo Higuain pulling the strings.

As AS sports daily put it: "Reyes blew away the cobwebs."

However, Marca sports newspaper sounded a little incredulous after a weekend which saw an all-time Spanish Liga low of 0.9 goals per game.

"Dreadful play, they hardly score any goals, the chairman talks a lot, not one galactico..."

"But there they are, Madrid. Reyes' goal beats Mallorca and leaves the all-whites joint league leaders."

The last time that was the case at the half way stage, five years ago, Real blew the title but won the Champions League, whereas a year later they made up a five-point deficit on Real Sociedad to win their last silverware.

'Federer gap closing'

Australian Open
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AFP, Melbourne

Andy Roddick may only have won one of his 13 matches with Roger Federer but he feels the gap with the supreme world number one player is closing.

The American sixth seed set up a marquee semi-final on Thursday with the Swiss defending champion after a straight-sets rout of close friend Mardy Fish to realise the semi-final seedings path.

Roddick's last success over the nine-time Grand Slam champion was nine matches ago in 2003 in Montreal, but he has been on the losing end in the last eight encounters.

Yet he believes he is making ground under the coaching of tennis

"I look forward to it. I feel like I'm in good form. I'd love to see where I match up," he said.

He added that he could not sit back and allow Federer to dictate the points in their semi-final.

"I've been a little bit more successful over the last couple times I played him," he said.

"I don't feel like you can sit back and let him create. I think that's when you get in trouble."

"I'm going to have to go with what I do well and try to attack him, at least make him come up with shots from uncomfortable positions."

"If he's comfortable and set while hitting the ball, that makes it tough."

Federer has deprived Roddick of some major silverware in recent years. The Swiss maestro downed him in the 2004 and 2005 finals at Wimbledon and last year's US Open decider.



PHOTO: AFP

Swiss World number one Roger Federer sighs a relief after his quarterfinal victory over Spaniard Tommy Robredo at the Australian Open on Tuesday.