



SHE WHO SCREAMS LAST: Russian top seed Maria Sharapova lets loose a scream of ecstasy as she celebrates her emphatic victory over Belgian favourite Kim Clijsters during their Australian Open semifinal in Melbourne on Thursday.

Real going all out for C'Ron

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid would be willing to make Cristiano Ronaldo their third biggest ever signing if they can lure him away from Manchester United.

According to a Spanish press report Thursday the on-fire United striker tops Real sport director Predrag Mijatovic's summer shopping list.

United would likely spurn any approach for the popular 21-year-old Portugal international, but according to AS newspaper the Spanish giants would be willing to pay United 50 million euros (65 million dollars) to let him go.

That would make Ronaldo the club's third most expensive signing ever, after Zinedine Zidane (94 million dollars) and Luis Figo (72 million dollars).

AS said the highly marketable Ronaldo would easily fill the role left by departing former England captain David Beckham, both on and off the park.

Barcelona have also been linked with Ronaldo, and any interest from the reigning Spanish champions could drive the fee even higher.

Ronaldo's contract at Old Trafford runs out in 2010, and United's assistant boss Carlos Queiroz said recently the club are already planning to start negotiations on extending that deal.

Sharapova blows Clijsters away

Australian Open
The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

AFP, Melbourne

Top seed Maria Sharapova crashed Kim Clijsters' Australian Open farewell Thursday, setting up a Grand Slam final against Serena Williams after downing the Belgian 6-4, 6-2.

There was no room for emotion as Sharapova clinically ended Clijsters' final campaign at Melbourne Park to become the first Russian woman ever to reach the tournament decider in Australia.

The 19-year-old pin-up has the chance to win her third Grand Slam title after hanging on against Clijsters, despite committing a flurry of unforced errors and double faults late in the match to offer her opponent a lifeline.

"I saw these double faults come in at the wrong time but somehow I managed to fight through and make the first serve when I had to," she said.

"I think that was the key and will also be the key in the final."

"I did the right things at the right

time. I was patient when I had to be patient, played a smart game."

Sharapova, who came within two points of being knocked out in the opening round, said it was her best performance of the tournament.

"I'll definitely come back," she said. "I don't just love to play tennis, I love to watch tennis, it's a great sport and in a few years I'll be sitting in the stands with maybe some kids and stuff."

Sharapova is playing some really good tennis," Sharapova said. "She has nothing to lose going into the match. Those are always dangerous opponents."

Sharapova, who has just regained the world number one ranking, joined the standing ovation for crowd favourite Clijsters, who is retiring at the end of the year to settle down.

A downcast Clijsters said she was disappointed with her farewell performance at the Rod Laver Arena, where she lost the final in 2004.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come up with a better match today but I tried everything I had and I came up against a better player," she said.

However, the 23-year-old

Clijsters said she would return as a spectator after marrying basketball player Brian Lynch later this year and settling down.

"I'll definitely come back," she said. "I don't just love to play tennis, I love to watch tennis, it's a great sport and in a few years I'll be sitting in the stands with maybe some kids and stuff."

Clijsters came out hard and broke Sharapova in the third game, chasing down her returns ferociously and sliding across the hardcourt to make her shots.

Even Sharapova's trademark grunt was muted as she poured everything into overcoming her opponent and advancing to the final for the first time after falling twice at the semis in 2005 and 2006.

Her father Yuri sat silent in the players' box after picking up 2,000 US dollar fine for coaching from the sidelines during Sharapova's quarterfinal win over Anna Chakvetadze Wednesday.

Sharapova mixed up her usual baseline game and found success attacking the net, breaking back in the fifth game.

The pair exchanged breaks again but Clijsters' serve was mis

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Andy feeling disgruntled

AFP, Melbourne

Before his torrid time against Roger Federer Thursday Andy Roddick believed the gap was closing with the Swiss king of tennis, but the mauling he received suggests the opposite.

Federer was in awesome form to dismantle the game of a player ranked sixth in the world 6-4, 6-0, 6-2 in just 1 hour 23 minutes, and the gutted American admitted he might have to think again.

"It was frustrating. You know, it was miserable. It sucked. It was terrible," said an irked Roddick.

"I was playing well coming in. There's no reason to think if you would have told me this beforehand, I probably didn't foresee it."

"You know, I just got to keep doing what I do. I wake up every morning. I put in as much as I can every day. I don't know if you'll find someone who questions that."

"You do your best not to get discouraged. You try to take it like a man. I caught an absolute beating tonight. There's no doubt about it. There's no two ways about it."

"You deal with it and you go back to the drawing board. You act like a professional, and you try to keep working hard."

Federer has become Roddick's nemesis, depriving him 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

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Ronaldo closer to Milan

INTERNET, undated

Milan have reportedly agreed a fee with Real Madrid to sign Ronaldo on Thursday, according to the latest reports.

The two clubs have been negotiating after Ronaldo made it clear that he was determined to terminate his contract with the Spanish giants and wanted to join the San Siro outfit in January.

The parties had initially failed to agree financial terms, as Milan were keen on signing Iker Casillas on a free transfer, whereas the Merengues were not willing to let him leave for nothing.

La Repubblica.it reports that a deal was finalised early this morning, and Ronaldo is expected to be at the Stadio Giuseppe Meazza to watch the Coppa Italia semi-final against Roma.

The website also stated that there are conflicting reports on the striker's price, as Milan sources suggest the Rossoneri will pay €4.6m, whereas elsewhere it has been reported as €5.7m.

According to El Mundo, Real accepted a €4.2m offer from the San Siro outfit, who had already been paired with the former Inter man last summer, when the Galacticos turned down an €11m offer.

Rossoneri Vice-President

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Serena powers past Vaidisova

Australian Open
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REUTERS, Melbourne

Serena Williams continued her astonishing comeback by powering past Czech teenager Nicole Vaidisova 7-6, 6-4 to reach the Australian Open final for the third time on Thursday.

The unseeded American, Melbourne Park champion in 2003 and 2005, edged a first set tiebreak and thwarted a late fightback from the 10th seed to win through in an hour and 46 minutes on Rod Laver Arena.

"She played some incredible points on match point, she reminded me a bit of myself," Williams said in a courtside interview after the Czech had saved five match points.

"I just tried to stay focused and calm. It was great. I'm excited (about the final) I have nothing to lose, I'm having a lot of fun. I'm

back in the top twenty and that means so much."

Williams, the former world number one who stands at 81st in the rankings after a 2006 season blighted by injury, made a slow start on her first grand slam semi-final appearance since she won at Melbourne Park two years ago.

Vaidisova, a semifinalist at Roland Garros last year, won Williams's opening service game with a crunching forehand winner and confidently held her own serve for a 2-0 lead.

But Williams soon found the pace and aggression that had seen off four seeds this week, and a nervy double fault from Vaidisova helped her level at 3-3.

"She played some incredible points on match point, she reminded me a bit of myself," Williams said in a courtside interview after the Czech had saved five match points.

"I just tried to stay focused and calm. It was great. I'm excited (about the final) I have nothing to lose, I'm having a lot of fun. I'm

tiebreak.

Williams raced into a 4-1 lead but at 5-2 served two double faults to give her opponent a chink of hope.

But an easy put-away, accompanied by a triumphant scream, gave Williams set point at 6-5 and she won it after 58 minutes when Vaidisova netted a high forehand.

Williams eased into a 5-1 lead in the second set and seemed on course for an easy victory, three double faults in game five from Vaidisova helping the American secure a double break.

But the Czech dug deep and saved four match points in game nine before holding to make Williams serve out for the match at 5-4.

Williams had used up all her Hawk-eye challenges when a wide forehand from Vaidisova on her fifth match point was called good, but the American made no mistake when she punched away a forehand volley to seal victory on match point number six.

Roddick Fed-exed

Australian Open
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AFP, Melbourne

World number one Roger Federer has stormed into a record-equalling seventh successive Grand Slam final with a straight sets humiliation of American rival Andy Roddick at the Australian Open.

Federer was in a different class as he raced into his third Australian final in four years with a 6-4, 6-0, 6-2 romp in just 1 hour 23 minutes.

It was Roddick's heaviest defeat in five Grand Slam matches with Federer, who now face either Chilean 10th seed Fernando Gonzalez or German 12th seed Tommy Haas in Sunday's final.

Gonzalez and Haas play their semifinal on Friday.

Federer equalled the all-time record for consecutive Grand Slam final appearances of seven, held since 1934 by Australian Jack Crawford.

"Winning matches is the best thing, but to break records that's something you never dream of, it's fantastic and I hope I can keep it up, I'm playing so well at the

moment, I might as well take them along the way," Federer said.

"I had one of these days where everything worked and I was unbeatable.

"It's just unreal. I'm shocked at it myself. The tournament's not even over yet, so let's not get carried away, let me try to do one more time and then let's get all excited."

It stretched Federer's unbeaten run of matches to 35 and increased his record to Roddick to 13-1.

The American, who spoke of his gap closing with Federer before the match, was upstaged by the precision strokeplay of the incomparable Swiss.

Federer has reached the Australian final without dropping a set in his six matches with American Michael Chang the last man to do this in 1996.

The phenomenal Federer has only lost two of 13 Grand Slam semifinals he has played in -- the 2005 Australian semi to Marat Safin and at Roland Garros in the same year.

Federer broke Roddick's serve in the first set but the American broke back in the fourth and looked good until the ninth game when his form suddenly deserted him.

The Swiss ace broke for the



Barcelona take slender lead

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona were confirmed Spain's 'winter champions', the unofficial honour going to the La Liga leaders after the first half of the season, despite only drawing 1-1 at lowly Real Betis on Wednesday.

"We had moments when we suffered more than we would have wanted so we still have work to do," commented Barca coach Frank Rijkaard in the wake of being held by the relegation-threatened side from Seville.

"But it's a shame we didn't do better than a draw because we deserved more after all the opportunities we had. At least we tried to get a result but this is a difficult ground," added the Dutch coach.

The reigning Spanish champions, who are going in search of their third consecutive La Liga title, have 39 points from 19 games and a one-point advantage over their nearest rivals.

Barca's second half substitute Egidio Gudjohnsen had two good chances to get the winner in the final 13 minutes but, like so often this season, the Icelandic striker couldn't quite capitalise on his opportunities.

Opinions differ among the Barcelona players as to whether being the winter champion

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Barcelona forward Javier Saviola (top) hurdles Real Betis goalkeeper Antonio Doblas after the latter had got to the ball ahead of the diminutive forward during their Primera Liga clash at Sevilla on Wednesday.

Swiss number one seed Roger Federer serves to US star Andy Roddick during their semifinal match at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Thursday.