



PHOTO: AFP

World number one Roger Federer will be hoping to end his barren run at the French open and become only the third player to win all four Grand Slams in a year.

NADAL-FEDERER FINAL Too close to call

AFP, Paris



Roger Federer won't be distracted by his place in history when he faces double French Open champion Rafael Nadal in what could be a classic Roland Garros title showdown on Sunday.

If Federer wins a first French Open, he will become only the third man, after Don Budge (1938) and Rod Laver (1962 and 1969), to hold all four Grand Slam titles at the same time.

Should Nadal triumph, the 21-year-old Spaniard will emulate Bjorn Borg by winning three successive Paris titles and become just the second man in 93 years to achieve the feat at the sport's most demanding Grand Slam.

Federer already has 10 majors in his collection but has known nothing but heartbreak here with Nadal beating him in the semifinals in 2005 and in the final last year.

Furthermore, Nadal has never lost in Paris, racking up 20 wins in 20 matches.

He has also looked the more impressive this time round, reaching his third successive final without dropping a set.

By contrast, the world number one has been stretched by Tommy Robredo, who won a set in the quarterfinals, as well as a gutsy Nikolay Davydenko in the last four.

"I don't want to talk too much about having the four titles in a row," said Federer.

"I want to be focused on this very specific match. I have never achieved such a thing so I don't how I'll feel. But I want to do my best, I'll feel. But I want to do my best, I'll feel. But I want to do my best, I'll feel.

focus on the match and win Roland Garros."

Victory would also put him at the halfway stage of winning the calendar Grand Slam with his Wimbledon and US Open title defences to come.

Federer won the first set in last year's final before being swept aside and the omens for the 2007 Roland Garros were not looking good earlier in the clay court season.

The Swiss lost again to Nadal in straight sets in the Monte Carlo final and suffered an embarrassing early exit in Rome at the hands of unheralded Italian Filippo Volandri.

He then split with coach Tony Roche as his clay season threatened to implode.

But in Hamburg, Federer finally got the better of Nadal for the first time on clay and brought to an end the Spaniard's record 81-match winning streak on his favourite surface.

It was his fourth career Hamburg win, proving to himself again that he can win on clay.

He has carried that renewed hope with him into Paris where he will be playing in a record eighth successive Grand Slam final, passing the previous best of seven in a row set by Australia's Jack Crawford in 1934.

"That shows consistency," said the Swiss who reached the final with a 7-5, 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (9/7) win over Davydenko.

"That was always a problem

when I was younger.

"Now I'm in the final again and that's great. I'm in great shape and I have a game plan for the match."

Despite his perfect record at Roland Garros, and having eased past Serbia's Novak Djokovic 7-5, 6-4, 6-2 in his semifinal, Nadal refuses to believe that he is the favourite to make it three-in-a-row.

"He beat me in Hamburg so maybe he is the favourite," said the 21-year-old.

"But I am playing the best tennis of my career. If I play my best on Sunday, it will be difficult for him.

"However, if he wins he will be the best player in history."

ROAD TO FINAL

Federer

1st rd: bt Michael Russell (USA)
2nd rd: bt Thierry Ascione (FRA)
3rd rd: bt Potito Starace (ITA)
4th rd: bt Mikhail Youzhny (RUS)
QF: bt Tommy Robredo (ESP)
SF: bt Nikolay Davydenko (RUS)

Nadal

1st rd: bt Juan Martin del Potro (ARG)
2nd rd: bt Flavio Cipolla (ITA)
3rd rd: bt Albert Montanes (ESP)
4th rd: bt Lleyton Hewitt (AUS)
QF: bt Carlos Moya (ESP)
SF: bt Novak Djokovic (SRB)



PHOTO: AFP

World number two and defending champion Rafael Nadal will be vying for a hattrick of French Open titles to become only the second player to achieve the feat.

Becks deserves a trophy: Zidane



Football

INTERNET, undated

Zinedine Zidane is hoping Real Madrid clinch the Primera Liga title for the sake of the Los Angeles Galaxy-bound David Beckham. Beckham has yet to win a major trophy with the Spanish giants since joining from Manchester United in 2003, but that could all change on Saturday with Madrid closing in on the league.

A victory for Madrid over Real Zaragoza, combined with defeats for rivals Barcelona and Sevilla in this weekend's penultimate round of

fixtures, would see Fabio Capello's men crowned champions.

And according to Zidane, a championship medal would be a fitting send-off for Beckham before he leaves for America this summer.

"I don't know what is going to happen, but I think that Real Madrid could win the league," said the French legend, who spent five years at Madrid before retiring last summer.

"I would like that to happen for the club, that is clear, for the players, but above all for David Beckham.

"After four years in Madrid, he deserves to leave with a trophy."

Zidane has fond memories of the three seasons he spent playing next

to Beckham with Madrid, even though it coincided with one of the least successful spells trophy-wise in the club's illustrious history.

"I am delighted to have played alongside Beckham in the same team," added the former World Cup winner and three-time FIFA World Player of the Year, who admits if he were in charge at the Bernabeu he would want the former England captain to remain with the club.

"Yes, without doubt. But now he has taken a decision and you have to respect that," he said in Spanish newspaper Marca.

Ze Roberto quits after Copa

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazilian international midfielder Ze Roberto has revealed that his appearance in the Copa America starting later this month will be his final call-up for the national side.

The 32-year-old, who heads for Bayern Munich next season, has complied with the wishes of the German outfit that he chose club or country.

"These decisions were difficult to make," explained the player.

"I hope I've made the right choice. My time in the national team is coming to an end, I've notified the federation (CBF). I don't want to be competing for a place when I know that I will be too old to play in the next World Cup."

Bayern manager Uli Hoeness

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Santangelo, Molik win doubles

AFP, Paris

Australia's Alicia Molik and Mara Santangelo of Italy won the French Open women's doubles title on Friday with a 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 win over Japan's Ai Sugiyama and Slovakia's Katarina Srebotnik.

It was Molik's second Grand Slam title having teamed with Russia's Svetlana Kuznetsova to win the 2005 Australian Open.

The 26-year-old Australian was also runner-up with Todd Woodbridge in the mixed doubles at Wimbledon and the US Open in 2004.

The 96-minute win was played out in front of just a few spectators on Court Philippe Chatrier with the match not finishing until 1910 GMT.

Robben staying at Chelsea

AFP, London

Chelsea's Dutch winger Arjen Robben is set to sign a new deal with the Premiership side that will keep him at the club for another five years, his father and agent said Friday.

Hans Robben insisted he had never spoken to Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon about his son's future, after the 23-year-old was linked with a move to the Spanish capital earlier this week.

Calderon had claimed the two parties were in the 'early stages' of talks with Chelsea but Robben senior declared: "I never met him or anyone from Madrid and did not speak to them."

"We're nearly finished negotiating with Chelsea, Arjen will stay another five years with the club."

Robben's decision to stay follows Ricardo Carvalho and Michael Essien. They both opted to agree to new long term deals while captain John Terry and midfielder Frank Lampard are expected to do the same.

Tough time awaits Federer

AFP, Paris



Rafael Nadal's bruised and battered French Open victims are unanimous -- Roger Federer is set for another Roland Garros heartbreak in Sunday's final.

One by one Lleyton Hewitt, Carlos Moya and Novak Djokovic have fallen to the two-times defending champion and not one of them has been able to take a set off the Spaniard.

What chance then for Federer who has tennis immortality in his sights and Nadal's imposing physique firmly in the way.

The Serb Djokovic was the latest to suffer at the hands of the Spanish maestro who at just 21 years old already is on his way to eclipsing Bjorn Borg as the greatest claycourt player of all time.

"He's very confident playing on clay, it's his favourite surface," the 20-year-old revelation of the year said after his straight sets defeat.

"During the match, when you see how fit he is, how much he can go left-right, running without dropping any energy."

"He is on one level all the time and it's not easy to hold on to him, especially on this surface."

"I can say that the final will be open, because the last match they played, Federer won in Hamburg. But I would put Rafa as the favour-

ite because he won in the past two years here in the French Open."

Former world Number one Lleyton Hewitt would not beg to differ.

Losing in straight sets to Nadal in the fourth round, the straight-talking Australian, who has lost his last nine games against Federer, nevertheless also gave the advantage to the younger man.

"I think he's going to be tough to beat," he said of Nadal.

"The conditions here suit him really well, probably more so than the court in Hamburg where Roger beat him. It bounces around a lot which I think helps Nadal more."

Moya, Nadal's victim in the quarterfinals, probably knows the game of his fellow Mallorcan better than anyone else as the two are close friends and associates.

"I think that there are just a few players who can even get a set from him," he said of Nadal.

"Maybe, if he is relaxed for a couple of games, maybe he loses his serve, so that's the only chance."

"But if he's playing focused the whole match, I don't see many players who can even get a set off him."

Same analysis from Spain's Davis Cup captain Emilio Sanchez who compares his young compatriot to Borg, a six times former winner in Paris.

"He forces the other player into

making mistakes. The pressure he applies to his opponents in the end destroys them," he said.

"For me he is logically the favourite for this final. He plays with his heart, but also with his physique. He is as rapid as a sprinter and as durable as a marathon runner. He is quite simply unique."

Mats Wilander, who won here three times in the 1980s, was more circumspect declining to give a prediction, but saying that Federer would not be swept away by Nadal like he was in last year's final.

Writing in L'Equipe sports daily, the Swede commented: "Roger has made considerable progress mentally since last year. And if there was one bet to make for me it would be that this time he will not be swamped by Rafael Nadal."

American great John McEnroe, working for US television in Paris gives a slight edge to Federer.

"If he wins the French Open, he'll be the greatest player of all time, ahead of Rod Laver, ahead of Pete Sampras," he said.

"If there's a guy that can beat Nadal, it's Roger. He's been sharper than Nadal through most of this tournament."

Nadal looks for Barca inspiration

AFP, Paris

Rafael Nadal will warm-up for his French Open title defence by watching his beloved Barcelona football team try and stay alive in the Spanish title race.

Nadal faces world number one Roger Federer in the Roland Garros final on Sunday but he will spend Saturday evening watching Barcelona take on Espanyol where the Catalan giants need a win to stay in contention for the championship.

"I love football," said Nadal. "I will watch the game. I always try and see the match when I can."

Nadal's uncle Miguel Angel played as a professional with Barcelona.

For a noble cause

AFP, London

England's footballers have pledged to play for their country for free, donating their match fees to help charitable causes in the run up to the next World Cup, the Football Association (FA) said Saturday.

The players have decided to set up their own charitable trust -- Team England Footballers Charity -- and hope to raise one million pounds (1.9 million dollars) over the next four years.

England captain John Terry said: "Each player in the England squad works in some way with local

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PHOTO: AFP

Mara Santangelo (R) of Italy and Alicia Molik of Australia pose with their trophy after winning the French Open women's doubles final against Japan's Ai Sugiyama and Slovakia's Katarina Srebotnik at Roland Garros on Friday.

Worst is past: Gerrard



Football

AFP, London

England have put their worst behind them and are now very much in the running to claim top spot in their Euro 2008 qualifying group, midfielder Steven Gerrard insisted Saturday.

England remain fourth in their qualifying group despite their 3-0 win in Estonia midweek which eased the pressure on head coach Steve McClaren.

But they have cut the gap to three points between themselves and leaders Croatia who, like fellow challengers Israel and Russia, all have to visit the new Wembley in the autumn.

And the 27-year-old Liverpool skipper believes that after their 1-1

draw against Brazil earlier this month there are signs England are starting to turn the corner.

"We got off to a bright start under Steve McClaren but, as players, we know we let the country down with our seven or eight performances before the Brazil game," said Gerrard.

"Performance levels dipped and they were definitely not of the standard we would have desired."

"The manager was getting all the stick but we are the players that he picks to do a job, the players that he believes in, and there have been more positive signs."

"We know we've got to look at the bigger picture and we are confident we can be in the 2008 tournament."

"We've got a big challenge ahead in the autumn. We've made it difficult for ourselves but there is still a lot of football to be played."

"We do believe in each other. You look round the dressing room, not just the 11 players in the side but the whole squad, and you see what ability we have got to call upon."

"We just had to start showing that on the field. We just needed to start getting results."

Gerrard added: "People say that it's between us and Russia for second place but we don't think so. There's still a lot of football to be played. We are only just over half-way through the group."

"Russia have to play us twice -- and you can tell everyone in Russia they will be in for two difficult games. I'm not going to concede first spot in the group."

"All those teams above us in the group as it stands have still got to

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PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea player and Dutch international Arjen Robben and his wife Bernadien Eillert smile after their wedding ceremony in Groningen on Saturday. Robben is set to sign a new deal with the Premiership side that will keep him at the club for another five years.