



Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova pumps her fist after winning a point against compatriot Anna Chakvetadze during the women's singles semifinal of the US Open at Flushing Meadows on Friday.

Kuznetsova battles into final

AFP, New York



Russia's Svetlana Kuznetsova struggled into the US Open women's final by taking an error-filled 3-6, 6-1, 6-1 semifinal victory Friday over sixth-seeded compatriot Anna Chakvetadze.

Kuznetsova, the 2004 US Open champion, will play for the title on Saturday night against the winner of a later semifinal between world number one Justine Henin and US 12th seed Venus Williams.

That later showdown between six-time Grand Slam champions, the reigning French Open champion from Belgium and reigning Wimbledon champion Williams, took on even more of a championship match feel after the Russians' sloppy match.

"It was extremely tough," Kuznetsova said. "I played the worst

first set. I couldn't put the ball in. I was really embarrassed."

Neither player could overcome nerves and windy conditions. Chakvetadze, playing in her first Grand Slam semifinal, made 46 unforced errors, 20 of them in the last set. Kuznetsova had 35 unforced errors but just 10 in the last set.

Despite the horror show, Kuznetsova will advance to a career-best second in the rankings, edging past Maria Sharapova to become the highest-ranked Russian player, and Chakvetadze will break into the world top five for the first time.

Kuznetsova played her way into a hole from the start by spraying 21 unforced errors in the first set but Chakvetadze returned the favour with 17 unforced bingles of her own to surrender the second.

Chakvetadze, a perfect 6-0 in career finals, made only one winner in the first set and then lost 12 of the last 14 games.

Kuznetsova won the first three points of the last set, prompting Chakvetadze to throw her racket. After that, Kuznetsova fell apart, losing seven of the next eight points to surrender a service break.

But Chakvetadze allowed Kuznetsova to break back and later swatted her 10th unforced error of the set, a wide forehand, to give Kuznetsova a 3-1 edge.

Kuznetsova held and broke again for a 5-1 edge and mercifully ended matters after 96 minutes.

After exchanging breaks with Kuznetsova to begin the match, Chakvetadze broke her compatriot's next two service games and raced to a 5-1 edge.

Kuznetsova, 22, held and broke back to 5-3 but double-faulted on break point to hand Chakvetadze, 20, the first set after 31 mistake-filled minutes in which Chakvetadze hit only one winner.

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Henin does a Williams-double

AFP, New York



Back-to-back wins over the Williams sisters have left top seed Justine Henin as a hot favourite for Saturday's US Open final, but she insists she will not underestimate opponent Svetlana Kuznetsova.

The 25-year-old Belgian defeated Venus Williams 7-6 (7/2), 6-4 in a tremendous semifinal on Friday, two days after trouncing the American's younger sister Serena 7-6 (7/3), 6-1 in the last eight.

Kuznetsova, on the other hand, strolled through the weak bottom half of the draw and did not meet a top 10 player until scraping past sixth seed Anna Chakvetadze 3-6, 6-1, 6-1 in Friday's other semifinal.

First problem for Henin will be recovering from her efforts in the 24 hours that separate her from Saturday's final.

"I know I'm probably not going to sleep very well this night because it's going to be a big final tomorrow," she said.

"The adrenaline is still going to be here for a couple of more hours now. I'm older. Tough to recover."

Then there is her opponent, against whom she has a crushing 14-2 winning record.

"It will be difficult that's for sure," she said. "I want to enjoy this moment now, but I know that tomorrow is going to be another day and I have to be a hundred percent focussed on that one."

"I will have to be very, very aggressive. With a lot of determination I believe I can do it."

Kuznetsova stunned the tennis world by winning the 2004 US Open as a little-known 19-year-old, the first Russian to do so, but since then she has struggled at times to main-

tain her form.

This year though she has been one of the busiest and most consistent of players on the WTA Tour even though she had to wait until the week before Flushing Meadows before winning another title.

New York, she says, brings out the best in her.

"Some players complain about the crowd here, but it's one of my favourite crowds of everywhere," she said.

"It's just kind of show time. The crowd is always crazy. It pumps me up. Many surprises happen and I love that."

The two players are old adversaries, having played each other 16 times since Wimbledon in 2003 and Henin holds a crushing 14-2 advantage in wins.

Kuznetsova though won their last meeting 6-4, 5-7, 6-4 in the semifinals of the German Open in May and Carlos Rodriguez, who has coached Henin throughout her professional career, is wary of the Russian's threat.

"We have to be on guard," he said. "Kuznetsova was the best in the other half of the draw and she will have nothing to lose."

"We know her pretty well and she can give trouble with her huge forehand, but Justine will be ready."

"She is playing incredibly this fortnight and most of all she is enjoying herself."

Rodriguez was referring to the emotional changes that have marked this year for Henin.

She opted out of the Australian Open at the start of the year following her split from husband Pierre-Yves Hardenne and this cleared the way for a reconciliation with her estranged father Jose, elder brothers David and Thomas and younger sister Sarah.

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Top seeded Belgian Justine Henin is ecstatic after winning her US Open semifinal against USA's Venus Williams at Flushing Meadows on Friday.

Sol extends Pompey stay

AFP, London

Sol Campbell, the former England defender whose career looked to be nearing an end when he left Arsenal last year, has signed a new contract that will keep him at Portsmouth until at least 2009.

Campbell, 32, has enjoyed a new lease of life at Portsmouth after injuries and depression blighted his final season at Arsenal. His current contract had been due to expire at the end of this campaign but he has been playing so well that the club were happy to extend his deal for a further season.

The extent of Campbell's return to form was underlined by his inclusion in England's squad for their upcoming Euro 2008 qualifiers, although injury forced him to pull out.

Campbell, who recently replaced the departed Dejan Stefanovic as skipper, said he was delighted to have secured the new contract.

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Jose, Arsene back changes

AGENCIES, Brussels



Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson was not present. He opposes proposals to give 16 cup winners a separate qualifying route into the Champions League and an allocation of four automatic places in the lucrative group stages.

"Considering Mr Ferguson's comments it was refreshing to see that in particular both Arsene Wenger and Jose Mourinho gave the new idea their blessing," Gaillard said.

The UEFA official added that Platini held a private meeting with the Chelsea coach.

"Platini's vision of soccer is the same as mine," Mourinho told Canada's Italian language daily Corriere Canadese on Saturday.

"I am just glad he didn't reduce the knockout phase as this is very exciting. The idea of allowing the cup winners into the Champions League is also an exciting idea."

On his election earlier this year, Platini said he wanted to open up the competition to lesser teams and smaller countries in a bid to combat the dominance of the larger nations such as England, Spain and Italy.

But in return for supporting the

former French international, those three countries would be given three automatic spots in the group stages rather than two.

The proposed shake-up was discussed by UEFA's new Professional Football Strategy Council last month with UEFA's executive due to vote on the issue in October.

The coaches and UEFA officials also discussed refereeing, discipline and the state of pitches.

European soccer's governing body agreed to explore the idea of changing its suspension policy for Champions League yellow cards.

"If a player is cautioned but then has not been booked for a number of matches, we will look at dropping the initial booking so he does not have suspension hanging over him for the next match," Gaillard said.

"They (coaches) also backed our decision to clamp down on off-the-ball jostling in the box prior to set-pieces and to leave it to the referee to decide whether to stop play due to injury instead of teams kicking it out of play."

Robben thanks Blues fans

INTERNET, undated

Former Chelsea winger Arjen Robben has sent a message of thanks to Blues fans following his departure for Real Madrid this summer.

Dutch winger Arjen Robben finally left Chelsea for Real Madrid in the summer after months of speculation over his future.

The 23-year-old didn't come cheap and cost Real Madrid a massive £24.5million, coming to Chelsea for a mere £12.1million in 2004.

In his time with the club Robben made a total of 97 appearances, scoring 19 times, although throughout his Stamford Bridge career fans recognised that if the winger stayed fit, his figures would reflect his talent.

Nevertheless, Robben has today sent a message to Chelsea fans, thanking them for their support, a courteous gesture in today's self-indulgent football industry.

"It was difficult to leave because I had a great time in my three years at Chelsea and I think I made a lot of friends as well," he told Chelsea TV.

"It was difficult because there was no time to say goodbye, because the deal was closed on Wednesday at ten o'clock in the evening and the following morning

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McClaren claim starting grid

AFP, Monza



Spain's double world Formula One champion Fernando Alonso threw down the gauntlet to McLaren teammate Lewis Hamilton by racing to pole position for the Italian Grand Prix here on Saturday.

It was the 17th pole of Alonso's career and came as a timely boost as he attempts to close a five-point gap on Hamilton in the drivers championship with five races remaining.

Alonso clocked a best time of one minute and 21.997 seconds to outpace Hamilton by just four-tenths of a second.

Brazilian Felipe Massa was third for Ferrari ahead of Nick Heidfeld of Germany in the leading BMW Sauber. Finn Kimi Raikkonen was fifth in the second Ferrari and Poland's Robert Kubica sixth in the second BMW.

Alonso said he felt "pleasantly surprised" by the speed of his McLaren, which handed him only his second pole of the year and 17th of his career.

His last 'pole', in Budapest at the Hungarian Grand Prix, was taken from him by the race stewards following an internal team dispute.

"I did not expect us to be so quick so it is a pleasant surprise for me and the team," said Alonso.

"It is looking very good, but we have to concentrate and complete the job in the race on Sunday."

"I have had many second places on the grid this year, but this time I have pole and I must thank the team

reduced to the top ten only and the removal of German Sebastian Vettel, 20, in his Toro Rosso, a hugely-disappointed Italian Giancarlo Fisichella in a Renault, Briton Anthony Davidson in a Super Aguri, Austrian Alex Wurz in a Williams, Brazilian Rubens Barrichello in his Honda and Australian Mark Webber in a Red Bull.

Hamilton applauded McLaren's one-two on the grid, and added: "I think we are capable of a very strong race performance so I am looking forward to that - we shall just have to see what happens at the start and then go from there."

"It was a good battle we had today and it was a good run from me. On the last run, I edged a little more from the car. We are one-two and that is great for the team."

Massa said: "It is obvious that the McLarens are very fast here and they have proved that, but we will do our best in the race. Nothing is won on a Saturday."

The session was run in warm, dry conditions under blue skies at the old Autodromo Nazionale in Monza's former royal park. The air temperature was 28 degrees Celsius and the track temperature was 33.

The first part of qualifying resulted in the removal of the slowest six cars and drivers. They were Japan's Sakon Yamamoto and his Spyker teammate German Adrian Sutil, veteran Briton David Coulthard, 36, in a Red Bull and Italian Vitantonio Liuzzi in a Toro Rosso, German Ralf Schumacher in a Toyota and Takuma Sato of Japan in a Super Aguri.

The second part saw the field

Alonso to retire?

AFP, Madrid

Embattled Formula One world champion Fernando Alonso is considering retirement, or could leave his McLaren team and return to Renault, according to reports here Saturday.

Alonso's position with British team McLaren, whom he joined prior to this season, have reached breaking point amid the meteoric rise of English teammate Lewis Hamilton.

Developments this week concerning a so-called spying scandal on rivals Ferrari, however, have heaped further pressure on the Spanish two-time world champion.

Marca sports daily said Saturday that Alonso is "considering pulling out for good at the end of the season", but gave no sources for its story.

The report added: "His chances of driving in a competitive team are lacking (...) and he wants to spend

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A crane transports the damaged Ferrari car of Finnish driver Kimi Raikkonen's at the Monza racetrack in Monza during the third practice session of the Italian Formula One Grand Prix on Friday. Raikkonen was unhurt after smashing his car into the barriers at the Variante Ascari chicane.

PHOTO: AFP

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