

RUSSIAN ROMPS, SERBIAN STRUGGLES It's Sharapova v Ivanovic

Australian Open
The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

AFP, Melbourne

A dogged Ana Ivanovic staged a stunning comeback Thursday to make the Australian Open final where a sizzling Maria Sharapova stands between her and a maiden Grand Slam title.

The Serbian fourth seed looked dead and buried after going down 6-0 in the first set of her semifinal with Slovak ninth seed Daniela Hantuchova, but turned the tables in emphatic fashion to win the next two 6-3, 6-4.

Facing her across the net on Saturday will be fifth seed Sharapova, who fired an ominous warning as she crushed another Serb, fourth seed Jelena Jankovic, 6-3, 6-1, who almost withdrew citing injury.

Ivanovic looked like wilting in humid conditions with the roof of the Rod Laver Arena closed due to rain, taking 46 minutes to win her first game and reviving memories of her choke in last year's French Open final.

But the 20-year-old recovered after allowing Hantuchova to rattle off eight straight games, cheered on by an ecstatic Melbourne Park crowd.

"She's a tough player and I knew I had to go for my shots early in the rally and it was frustrating because I couldn't make any, she was playing really well," she said, applauding the crowd for helping her regroup.

"I tried to stay calm as much as I could but obviously it wasn't easy."

Sharapova is into her second successive Australian decider, and against Jankovic reproduced the stunning form that blew world number one Justine Henin off court in the quarterfinals.

"I'm really happy I got through

and I'm back in the final," said the Russian, who is on a mission to make amends for last year's humiliating loss to Serena Williams in the final.

"I had the experience going into last year's final and it didn't turn out too good," she added.

"I'm just glad that I've been able to play such good tennis and I hope I can continue that for another match."

While Sharapova was impressive, she benefited from the early-season injuries that have hindered Jankovic. The Serbian was clearly in pain and needed treatment during the match for a lower back problem.

At one point, she was ready to call it quits.

"I wanted to withdraw, but it was not fair for the crowd. It's a semifinal, so I played as much as I could to finish the match," said the 22-year-old.

"And I thought that Maria played very, very well. She deserved to win."

"Everything she hit, each strike was amazing. She didn't make a mistake. She was just on a roll."

Sharapova's intensity was clear from the outset.

The Russian held Jankovic to love as she served in the first game, flexing her muscles early as she blasted an ace past her Serbian opponent.

Jankovic, with only a popgun serve to match Sharapova's cannon, relied on her groundstrokes to try to run the Russian around but mistakes proved costly.

The first set statistics showed Sharapova's dominance, the Russian hitting 20 winners to Jankovic's three.

She began the second set in the same fashion, breaking Jankovic in the opening game before the Serb called a medical timeout to receive off-court treatment for a lower back injury, and the match was effectively over.



Russian star Maria Sharapova is all-smiles after routing Serbian Jelena Jankovic in their semifinal of the Australian Open in Melbourne on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP



Serbian starlet Ana Ivanovic protests a tough line call during her battling semifinal victory over Slovakian Daniela Hantuchova at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

OPEN SECRETS

Australian Open
The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

AGENCIES, Melbourne

One phone call in six months, the occasional letter.

Maria Sharapova looks back on the two years she lived in the United States as a girl pursuing a tennis career while her mother had to stay in Russia, and says she never wants to go through it again.

Yelena Sharapova is a constant presence in her daughter's life, even if she's rarely seen at tennis tournaments.

Sharapova moved to Florida with her father, Yuri, when she was 7 to train at Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, while Yelena remained in Russia due to visa restrictions.

"In those days I barely talked to her on the phone. You didn't really have good communication back then," said Sharapova, sharing the details at a news conference after downing No. 3 Jelena Jankovic 6-3, 6-1 to reach the Australian Open final.

"I mean, we talked maybe once in six months. It would be much tougher if I had to do it now. But I

always remember writing her letters. I'd always write her letters."

At that time, Sharapova said, she was too overwhelmed with the move to the America to pine for her mother.

"I was younger, I was just so excited and overwhelmed by the move to the United States, by the new surroundings," she said.

"I remember the day that I saw her after those two years. She just looked at me, she's like, 'Oh, my, you've changed so much.'"

Even now, Yelena rarely travels the tennis circuit, while Yuri is constantly on tour.

"When I played juniors she went to some tournaments," Sharapova said. "But it's one of those things. I feel like if she did travel around I would really feel like I'm taking her life away from her."

Sharapova said she values her mother's influence away from the court.

"She brings such good energy and positive chi into myself and all the people that are around her," Sharapova said. "She's the one that always takes me to museums. She knows when this exhibition is going on. She'll take me to the musicals. She's a very wonderful woman."

DRESS BACK IN THE CLOSET

Jelena Jankovic's trademark sparkle was dimmed by a painful semifinal loss at the Australian Open on Thursday. But the Serb third seed, playing through a catalogue of injuries, still managed to keep her sense of humour.

But until further notice, there won't be any more photo calls with the leggy Serb stepping out of a yellow Lamborghini wearing a thigh-skimming little black dress at the Open player party after going down 6-3, 6-1 to Maria Sharapova.

"When you have pain in your back, the worst thing is to have heels on and put on a short dress," said Jankovic, who is vowing to take time off to cure injuries ranging from buttock to back.

"I can't bend down, I can't do anything."

The smiling seed admitted she was playing in pain during the 78-minute loss to last year's losing finalist.

"I wanted to withdraw, but it was not fair for the crowd. It's a semi-final, so I played as much as I could to finish the match."

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Iran name Clemente as coach

AFP, Tehran

Iran on Thursday named Spaniard Javier Clemente as their new national football coach, ending months of uncertainty over who would take charge of one of the sport's powerhouses in Asia.

Clemente, who was sacked as Serbia coach last month after failing to lead the team to the Euro 2008 finals, was awarded a three-year contract through to 2011.

"Clemente has signed a three-year contract with the federation and based on the contract he will be Iran's national team coach until 2011," Iranian Football Federation (IFF) official Mehdi Taj was quoted as saying by the ISNA news agency.

"He will be in Tehran on January 30 to observe the Iranian side taking on Costa Rica and probably will stay for Iran versus Syria," Taj said in reference to Iran's preliminary match for the 2010 South Africa World Cup.

Taj, who confirmed that the Spaniard would receive a salary of around 30,000 euros a month, said the appointment was made solely

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Draws all around

AFP, Accra



Africa Cup of Nations
GHANA 2008

It was a case of stalemate all round in Tamale for Wednesday's African Nations Cup Group D games, with a wonder strike by Elvio Van Heerden saving South Africa against Angola and a late Tunisia fight back earning them a point against Senegal.

Angola were in the driving seat against the 2010 World Cup hosts after a thumping header from Mateus 'Manucho' Goncalves, the teenager who after the competition heads to Old Trafford to take up his new contract with Manchester United.

As Angola looked to be holding on Manucho cleared the ball off the line when South Africa captain Aaron Mokoena thought he had equalised but it was Van Heerden who saved the day for Carlos Alberto Parreira's men.

The substitute from Belgian outfit Club Brugge latched on to a pass from Teko Modise, drifted past

a defender and fired an unstoppable shot over goalkeeper Luis 'Lama' Joao to earn the 1-1 draw.

"We just had to keep going, had to create chances. We worked very hard, we'll be better in our next game against Tunisia," South Africa's goal hero said.

For Parreira Bafana Bafana (The Boys) deserved more than a point given their endeavour.

"I knew we were capable of getting a good result but this one doesn't do justice to the shape of the match," he said. "We had a greater share of the play than Angola but we weren't able to score."

"If we want to qualify we'll have to now win one of our remaining two games. Any one of the four teams in the group can still qualify."

In the first act of the Tamale double header, Tunisia snatched a late goal to share the spoils 2-2 with Senegal.

The 2004 champions punished Senegal for squandering a multitude of chances when Majdi Traoui unleashed a 'rocket' that flew past motionless goalkeeper Tony Sylva seven minutes from full-time.

Senegal's Polish coach, Henri Kasperczak, rued his side's missed opportunities.

He said: "Tunisia had a lot of success with that 30m shot. We should have killed off the game, but the opening match is never easy."

"Both teams played well tactically. In the first half we were surprised by the Tunisians, and we were chasing the lead. Overall the result is fair, but we did create so many chances."

Kasperczak added: "I'm a little disappointed because we lost three points tonight, but after going in front we let the game escape from us when we had it safely in our grasp."

"We conceded a stupid goal on a one-two and unfortunately we missed too many chances, that's what makes the difference between the top teams, but you saw a decent Senegal tonight."

This meeting came with a fair amount of history attached to it. Senegal 'did it' for Roger Lemerre's tenure as France manager with that stunning upset over the then reigning champions at the 2002 World Cup.

And when the pair last met, at the 2004 African Nations Cup, Senegal seethed after claiming host status had played a part when they fell 1-0 to Lemerre's Tunisia in an

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Juventus hunt Bundesliga duo

AFP, Berlin

A pair of the Bundesliga's brightest stars - Werder Bremen midfielder Diego and Hamburg captain Rafael van der Vaart - are being hunted by Italian giants Juventus, according to reports here.

While Werder are battling hard to keep the services of their Brazilian midfield maestro Diego, Hamburg confirm they have already spoken to Juventus about naming a price for want-away Dutchman van der Vaart.

"We are in discussions with Juventus, but we can't say more at this stage," Hamburg spokesman Joern Wolf told German agency SID.

Van der Vaart is under contract until 2010, but can leave Hamburg next year for a fixed transfer fee of 1.5 million euros (2 million US dollars), but the 24-year-old is reported to be worth 20 million euros (29 million US dollars) in the current market.

The Dutchman has rejected a contract extension and has made no secret of his desire to join a big European club, having been famously photographed with a Valencia shirt last summer which

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Adebayor says sorry

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal striker Emmanuel Adebayor has apologised for a clash with teammate Nicklas Bendtner that left the young forward with a bruised nose at the end of the club's 5-1 League Cup humiliation at the hands of Tottenham.

Bendtner appeared to indicate that he had been head-butted by Adebayor towards the end of the semifinal second leg, and the Togo striker was contrite about his actions.

"I think that we should have been more calm during the game and although I was pleased to get a goal back for the team when I came on, I am sorry for the disagreement with my teammate Nicklas," Adebayor said Wednesday.

"We are both passionate about this club and sometimes that can be projected in the wrong way. It was a mistake. We want to focus on

the games ahead and rely on our squad's great togetherness to achieve a fantastic season."

Gunners boss Arsene Wenger could have done without the distraction of an intra-team flare-up after a night in which his young lineup was taken apart by the quality of Tottenham's counter-attacking.

But club captain William Gallas insisted that the experience gained from such setbacks could prove valuable in the future.

"All the young boys wanted to go to Wembley and I know it is difficult to accept," Gallas said. "Now we have to be strong and forget everything because on Saturday we have another big game which will not be easy."

Arsenal face Newcastle in an FA Cup fourth round tie at the Emirates stadium on Saturday.

The Football Association has asked to see television footage of the clash between Adebayor and Bendtner to assess whether any disciplinary charges should be levelled against either player.



Inter Milan striker Julio Cruz (L) heads past Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon to score one of his two goals during the first leg of their Italian Cup quarterfinal at the San Siro on Wednesday. PHOTO: INTERNET

Late rally rescues Juve

Football

AFP, Rome

Juventus produced a stirring late fight-back to snatch a 2-2 draw against Inter Milan at the San Siro in the Italian Cup quarterfinal first leg on Wednesday night.

Inter had looked like they were cruising to victory despite playing with a numerical disadvantage for most of the match as they led 2-0 with 11 minutes left to play.

That would have been an amazing result after defender Nicolas Burdisso was sent-off on just eight minutes for a horror challenge on Alessandro Del Piero.

But goals from Del Piero and Jean-Alain Boumsong salvaged a draw for the visitors and nicely sets up next week's second leg in Turin.

"Inter deserved to take a two-goal lead. We seemed to be sleeping and failed to react," admitted Juventus boss Claudio Ranieri.

"But the team always keeps going and it was important to get those two goals at the end."

Inter coach Roberto Mancini

made a host of changes to his team as he rested regulars such as goalkeeper Julio Cesar and top scorer Zlatan Ibrahimovic, although Juve also sat out several first choice players, such as Italy stopper Gianluigi Buffon.

Even with a much changed outfit, and a man down for most of the match, Inter still opened up a two-goal lead.

Argentina forward Julio Cruz, enjoying his best season yet at Inter, scored the opener on 54 minutes, heading home a cross from Portuguese youngster Vitor Pele.

What made that goal even the more remarkable was that Inter were actually playing with nine men at the time as Santiago Solari was off the field receiving treatment to his arm.

Inter then went further ahead 20 minutes later as Cruz nipped in front of French centre-back Boumsong to beat Emanuele Belardi at his near post for 2-0.

But just as it looked as if the runaway league leaders would cruise to victory, Juventus hit back.

Del Piero gave them hope on 79 minutes, rifling home a stunning

left-foot volley from French striker David Trezeguet's lay-off.

And five minutes from full-time Boumsong made amends as he headed home a corner from Raffaele Palladino off the under-side of the bar.

Inter nearly snatched a winner and Cruz his hat-trick, as the big striker grazed the outside of the post late on.

In other matches Roma also overcame the early loss of a player to earn a 1-1 draw at Sampdoria.

French defender Philippe Mexes - Boumsong's former centre-back partner during their days at Auxerre - saw his marching orders for two yellow cards in the first half.

Former Tottenham midfielder Reto Ziegler gave Sampdoria the lead but Macedonia forward Mirko Vucinic scored a brilliant solo effort to snatch a draw for the visitors, who must start as favourites in next week's second leg in Rome.

Meanwhile, Udinese overcame a 2-1 half-time deficit to beat Sicilians Catania 3-2 at home. Lazio entertain Fiorentina in the last quarterfinal on Thursday.