



An exultant Maria Sharapova holds aloft the Australian Open trophy during a cruise on the Yarra River in Melbourne on Saturday. Sharapova won the title by beating Ana Ivanovic in straight sets in the final. PHOTO: AFP

Maria rules Australia

Australian Open
The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

REUTERS, Melbourne

It was to be the Glam Slam, the squealer versus the squeaker. Instead, Saturday's Australian Open women's final was a battle of brinkmanship and jangling nerves. Ana Ivanovic blinked first and Maria Sharapova was the champion.

Russia's tennis Tsarina beat Ivanovic 7-5 6-3 to win her third grand slam title and atone for last year's loss in the final to Serena Williams.

It was an emphatic title -- she won the crown without losing a set in seven matches.

"I love you everyone, thanks so much for everything," the former Wimbledon and U.S. Open champion beamed as she held aloft the trophy.

"This morning I got a text from Billie Jean King saying champions take chances and pressure is a privilege. I am just glad I could take my chances today."

For fellow 20-year-old Ivanovic, it was a second grand slam final defeat and one which left her in tears.

"It hurts a bit now but I am sure I can learn from this," she told reporters. "Already I felt better in today's final than in last year's

French Open final, so that's good. "Of course I am disappointed but I feel I have plenty of grand slam finals ahead of me."

It took 91 minutes on a centre court cauldron for Sharapova to finish off the Serb.

When she did so, she sank to her knees as her opponent's forehead splayed wide on matchpoint, looking skywards as tears filled her green eyes.

Brilliant in a white fringed dress, her blonde pony-tail pulled behind a white visor, Sharapova fairly shimmered on Rod Laver Arena.

Ivanovic's shoes still squeaked when she returned and Sharapova certainly shrieked as play got underway.

The Russian, who struggled with injury throughout 2007, won the toss and elected to receive but Ivanovic stared her down and held comfortably.

Sharapova's serve was something else, however. Powerful and well-directed, she dominated on her own delivery.

She got the breakthrough in the fifth game when she slammed a backhand winner to move 3-2 ahead. That winner was accompanied by the loudest shriek of the match -- so loud a baby in the stands started crying.

It was not until the eighth game of the match that Sharapova lost even a point on her serve, but having achieved that mini break-

through Ivanovic's confidence grew and she broke thanks to two double faults from the Russian.

Back on serve, the Serb celebrated with a strange clenched fist pump that started with her arm extended before she snatched it into her body. The Pavlovian yell of "C'mon" followed.

Three games later Sharapova nosed ahead again, though, which heralded more fist-pumping and she duly served out to love to clinch the set 7-5 as the mercury reached 34 degrees Celsius.

Melbourne's Serb population was in fine voice but could do little to raise their favourite.

Sharapova grabbed a break in the seventh game of the second set and smelt blood. Not even a piece of advertiser's music accidentally blaring from an on-court speaker could put her off as she comfortably held serve for a 5-3 lead.

Ivanovic's head dropped and she quickly fell behind 0-40 to hand the Russian three championship points.

Ivanovic saved the first two but victory was Sharapova's when the Serb's forehand flew wide.

"It's amazing," Sharapova said. "Sometimes when you're putting the work in it just seems so, so hard."

"When you're going through tough moments, you never know when you're going to have good moments. I'm just so thankful that I got this one."

OPEN SECRETS

Australian Open
The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

AFP, Melbourne

Maria Sharapova said tennis great Billie Jean King inspired her Australian Open win Saturday with an encouraging text message ahead of her final against Ana Ivanovic.

The Russian said the 12-time Grand Slam champion gave her a simple piece of advice: "Champions take chances and pressure is a privilege."

"I had those great words in my mind during the match," the tournament fifth seed said after beating Serbian fourth seed Ivanovic in straight sets 7-5, 6-3.

The 20-year-old said she was playing in a tournament at Roehampton in Britain when King first approached her and offered encouraging advice and the pair had kept in touch since, largely through text messages.

"From that point on, she's just always been really supportive," she said.

"I actually don't see her that often but she's always one of the first people to text me when either I'm having a tough moment or a great win."

"It's wonderful because she's just done so much for the game and is such a great supporter of the sport."

Sharapova, whose Australian win was her third Grand Slam title, joked it would be tough to match

King's record at the majors. "I've got a long way to go to that," she said.

Sharapova also dedicated the win to coach Michael Joyce's mother Jane, who died last year.

"It completely changed my perspective on life," she said.

BRINGING IN THE PARENTS

The parents of Jo-Wilfried Tsonga arrive here on Sunday on a dash to see France's new sporting hero play in his first Grand Slam final against Novak Djokovic at the Australian Open.

Unseeded Tsonga has been phoning his parents, brother and sister every night while he charged his way through four seeded opponents to reach the Australian final here in progress that has captivated the French public.

Tsonga, bidding to become France's first Grand Slam champion since Yannick Noah 25 years ago and the first French winner of the Australian Open in 80 years, said his parents were scheduled to arrive on the morning of the night final.

Mothers Evelyn and Congolese father Didier will be accompanied by French Tennis Federation president Christian Bimes and former US Open and Wimbledon finalist Cedric Pioline.

"They've been watching all my matches on television," Tsonga said.

"I've been getting great text messages from them. Things like: 'You're making us weep with joy.' My brother said: 'Go all the way -- you can win this tournament.'"

Didier Tsonga is a chemistry teacher and Evelyn is a school teacher.

BURNING 'THE HOODIE'

Newly-crowned Australian Open champion Maria Sharapova said she would celebrate her win Saturday by burning her father Yuri's infamous 'assassin' camouflage hooded top.

Sharapova caused outrage at the season-opening Grand Slam when he made a throat-slitting gesture after his daughter's quarter-final win over world number one Justine Henin as he wore the army-print sweatshirt courtside.

He escaped punishment for his actions after tennis authorities accepted his explanation that it was an in-joke between father and daughter that had been misinterpreted.

However, the Australian press said it was "gutter behaviour" that cemented his place in the club of infamous tennis parents, while even Sharapova said her father "looks like an assassin" in the top.

She said after downing Serbian fourth seed Ana Ivanovic in the final that she was going to get rid of the controversial garment once and for all.

"I'm actually going to burn his jacket," she said.

"I'm burning that thing, he didn't hide it yet."

TANGIBLE ALI CONNECTION

Australian Open finalist Jo-Wilfried Tsonga's resemblance to a young Muhammad Ali has caused quite a stir at the year's first grand slam.

PHOTO: AFP

Shearer rejects Magpies

Football

AGENCIES, London

Alan Shearer will not be going back to Newcastle United as Kevin Keegan's number two but the new manager said his former striker could still have a role at St James' Park, the club said on Friday.

Keegan took Shearer to Newcastle for a then-world record fee of 15 million pounds (\$29.38 million) in 1996 and the hometown boy was adored by the local fans as he scored a club record 206 goals, including 148 in the league.

There had been much speculation that Shearer would give up his current TV pundit role with the BBC to return to the north east, initially as a replacement for Sam Allardyce and, after Keegan's appointment, as his former boss's number two.

Keegan, however, said that after

the two men talked things over for four hours on Thursday they came to a different conclusion.

"We talked in detail about this club - I know all his views on it now, he knows all mine, and we will talk again on Monday."

"It was great to see him again because I haven't really been in contact with Alan for a year, and I think we both missed that."

"We will see what happens on Monday. It will not be as number two, I will tell you that," Keegan told the club's Web site (www.nfc.premiumtv.co.uk).

"It will not be, and that's the conclusion we both came to. But it will be, if he decides to come in, a very worthwhile role."

"Alan doesn't come in here (to the training ground), he doesn't come in and around this place, and I would like to encourage the old players to come back."

I used to get them all coming

back at Manchester City.

But Alan will come in, if he comes, and it will be a role that's worthwhile, or he will say, 'No, not at the moment' because like we both said last night, if it is not worthwhile, let's not do it. That's where we are with it."

The Shearer situation is not one which needs to be resolved urgently, however, with transfer deals to be done before next Thursday's deadline and the little matter of two visits to Arsenal to come inside four days.

Newcastle are in North London at the moment for their FA Cup fourth round tie at the Emirates Stadium, and will return on Tuesday evening with three Barclays Premier League points at stake.

Keegan already has Terry McDermott and Arthur Cox at the club to assist him but he said he did see Shearer, 37, as a future manager of the Premier League club.

'FIFA stronger than UN'

AFP, Buenos Aires

Bolivia president Evo Morales, frustrated by curbs on football matches played at altitude in his South American country, said on Friday that the sport's ruling body FIFA was more powerful than the United Nations.

"If the United Nations says you can live at altitude, then why can't you play football at altitude?" asked Morales at a press conference here.

"With the help of South Americans, we are going to defeat this discriminatory measure."

FIFA have recommended that teams playing in Bolivia, whose capital La Paz stands at 3,600m above sea level, must be allowed a three-day adaptation period for matches played at 2,500m.

For matches above 2,750m, a period of adaptation of a week is obligatory and above 3,000m the rule will be not to play unless there has been a period of acclimatization of at least two weeks.

Morales claimed that he had the support of his Brazilian counterpart Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as well as the South American football federation in his battle over the altitude ruling.

The Chelsea star said: "The game was tough but we made it easier by scoring the first goal."

At Sudan's team hotel a fight broke out when an Egyptian television crew attempted to interview Sudan players ahead of Saturday's clash.

Fists flew and the police were called with the Egyptian media men saying they planned to file a complaint.

On a day of disputes Zambia's players were reportedly prepared to boycott the game in a row over the 2,000 dollar bonus for their win over Sudan.

Iniesta extends Barca deal

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona midfielder Andres Iniesta has extended his contract with the Catalans until 2014, the club said on Friday.

"Andres Iniesta has extended his contract with FC Barcelona until June 30, 2014," a statement read, adding that any club wanting to prise Iniesta away before then would have to pay 150 million euros (200 million dollars) from a current 60 million euros.

The 23-year-old Spanish international's current deal runs out in June 2010.

In Barca's 2005 title campaign he was a mainstay of the side, missing just one league game.

Akram denied work permit

AFP, London

Nashat Akram's hopes of becoming the first Iraqi to play in England's Premier League have been dashed after Manchester City failed to secure a UK work permit for the midfielder.

The club announced on Friday that it had failed in an appeal against the rejection of the permit application, despite manager Sven-Goran Eriksson making a personal appearance at the decisive hearing.

City had agreed to transfer Akram from the Al-Ain club in the United Arab Emirates and he had impressed the coaching staff during a recent trial at the club.

Eriksson said: "This is a big blow and a great disappointment to us. I have huge sympathy for Nashat. He is a very good footballer with an excellent international pedigree. He has now returned to the Middle

Better for the experience

REUTERS, Melbourne

Defeat was a bitter pill to swallow but the experience has steered Ana Ivanovic for another grand slam run, the Australian Open runner-up said on Saturday.

The 20-year-old Serb, beaten by Maria Sharapova 7-5 6-3 in the Melbourne Park title match, also lost last year's French Open final to Justine Henin, though this defeat was far less painful than that 6-1 6-2 drubbing.

"I already feel much better in today's final than I felt in the French Open final," Ivanovic told reporters. "It hurts a bit now, but I'm sure I can learn from it."

"Obviously, I was emotional out there and I was really disappointed I couldn't take the chances I had."

"But I'm still young and I still think I have a lot of grand slam finals in front of me."

Ivanovic was placed under immediate pressure by the fifth seed, particularly on her serve, but she managed to hold her first two games.

Sharapova also dominated her own service, failing to concede a point in her first three games, and she won five throughout the match without conceding a point.

"She was serving so well (and) it was hard for me to control the returns," said Ivanovic.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 4

Drogba lifts Elephants

AFP, Accra



The Ivory Coast became the first side to qualify for the African Nations Cup quarterfinals on Friday but fellow heavyweights Nigeria's hopes were left hanging by a thread.

The Elephants from the Ivory Coast brushed aside Benin 4-1, with Didier Drogba getting his first goal of this year's tournament, to go top of Group B and assured of a place in the last eight.

A goalless draw against Mali in the second match in Sekondi left Nigeria with just one point and facing an all-or-nothing date with Benin (0 points) on Monday while at the same time needing Ivory Coast to beat Mali (4).

It was the first scoreless stalemate of the 2008 tournament and it left Nigeria precariously close to their first opening round exit since their disastrous title defence campaign in 1982.

"We're still in the tournament, we'll have to keep going and see what happens," said Nigeria's man-of-the-match, John Mikel Obi.

The run up to Friday's double header at Essipong Stadium was overshadowed by match-fixing claims made by Benin coach Reinhard Fabisch.

The German-born Fabisch said he had been approached last weekend by a man representing an Asian betting syndicate interested in 'buying' Benin's opening game against Mali last Monday.

"He wanted to find out from me if there was any possibility of manipulating the match," the 57-year-old disclosed.

"I told him: 'Look, you have two minutes to leave the hotel or I will call the police.'"

Benin's game against Ivory Coast on Friday had been widely described as a mismatch given the firepower from the English Premiership and Spanish League at

the Ivorians' disposal.

And so it proved with Drogba, Yaya Toure, Abdelkader Keita and Aruna Dindane on target to crush the curiously named Squirrels and further press home the Elephants' tag as one of the tournament favourites.

Sweden-based Razack Omotoyossi scored a stoppage-time consolation goal for Benin.

But success for the 1992 champions and 2006 finalists came at a price as Arsenal defender Kolo Toure was stretched off just before half-time with a suspected groin injury.

Drogba, who had a knee operation last month leading to fears he

might miss the biennial tournament, came off after 68 minutes to be replaced by Boubacar Sanogo.

The Chelsea star said: "The game was tough but we made it easier by scoring the first goal."

At Sudan's team hotel a fight broke out when an Egyptian television crew attempted to interview Sudan players ahead of Saturday's clash.

Fists flew and the police were called with the Egyptian media men saying they planned to file a complaint.

On a day of disputes Zambia's players were reportedly prepared to boycott the game in a row over the 2,000 dollar bonus for their win over Sudan.



Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba (C) celebrates with teammates after winning against Benin in their African Nations Cup match at Sekondi on Friday. PHOTO: AFP

PICTURE OF THE WEEK



Inter Milan striker Herman Crespo (R) pulls out the party tricks as he executes a 'rabona' in their Serie A match against Parma on January 21. A rabona is a move that involves a player shooting or crossing a ball after bringing his kicking foot from behind his non-kicking foot. Portuguese starlets Ricardo Quaresma and Cristiano Ronaldo are well-known exponents of the move. PHOTO: AFP