



SERENA WILLIAMS

DINARA SAFINA

## Mind games from Serena

### Australian Open

AFP, Melbourne

With nine Grand Slams already in the trophy cabinet, US veteran Serena Williams says all the pressure will be on Russia's Dinara Safina when the pair clash in the Australian Open final Saturday.

The American is the bookies' red-hot favourite to win her fourth Australian title in the Rod Laver Arena, while Safina acknowledges she is the underdog in her search for a first Grand Slam crown.

Adding spice to the match, the winner will replace Serb Jelena Jankovic as the number one-ranked player in the world.

Williams said she was keen to "leave her mark" and enter the elite group of players with 10 or more majors but felt relaxed going into the 13th Grand Slam decider of her career.

The 27-year-old has struggled with poor form in the

tournament but still did enough to reach the final, becoming the biggest prize-winner in the history of women's sport on the way.

"I feel like I have nothing to lose," the reigning US Open champion said.

"If I win, that would be great. If I lose, I'll just leave with the confidence that I can get far in a tournament when I'm not playing my best and go home and work even harder for the next time."

Williams, who came into the tournament as second seed, said she was desperate to win a fourth title in Melbourne, where she has triumphed in every final she has contested.

The American has a 5-1 winning record over Safina, seeded third here, whose only previous appearance in a Grand Slam final was a straight sets loss to Ana Ivanovic in last year's French Open.

But Williams was wary of Safina, who she said had transformed into an intense,

tenacious and incredibly fit player whose loss at Roland Garros would spur her on in Saturday's final.

"She's going to be way more hungry for it and want it even more. That's going to be definitely going for her," she said.

For Safina, a win in the final would allow her to finally emerge from elder brother Marat Safin's shadow.

It would also create a piece of history, with the siblings becoming the first brother-sister combination to each hold the number one ranking.

The 22-year-old, who admits her combustible temperament sometimes means she is her own worst enemy on the court, expected her French Open experience would help settle any big-match nerves during Saturday's final.

"I hope all the experience, all the pressure, I went through in that match will help me for my next match on Saturday," she said.

She has shed seven kilograms (15.5 pounds) in the

past six months and will contest the final in the best physical shape of her life, also crediting coach Zeljko Krajan with adding mental steel to her game.

Her new attitude was on display when she defeated Australia's Jelena Dokic in front of a fiercely parochial crowd in the quarter-finals, a win she said would not have happened 12 months ago.

"I stayed very tough mentally there, I didn't panic," she said. It made me stronger now.

"Hope (the crowd) are going to be behind me, as I'm underdog coming into the final."

While some players concede they feel intimidated against Williams, Safina said she was eager to test herself against the American.

"I can't talk about the other players, how they feel when they play against her, just myself," she said.

"We played three times last year and I beat her once. I'm looking forward to playing against her this time."

## Chocolate cake for Safina...if she wins

INTERNET, undated

Dinara Safina is prepared to celebrate with a chocolate cake should she deny Serena Williams a fourth title at the Australian Open when the pair meet in Saturday's women's final. Safina, younger sister of 2005 men's champion Marat Safin, is also playing for history with the match-winner taking over the number one WTA ranking from Jelena Jankovic.

In addition, a dream victory would bury the demon of Safin's Roland Garros finals loss to Ana Ivanovic on clay last spring in Paris.

"To win tomorrow and to be number one in the world, I don't know, I'll go and buy chocolate cake," said the unassuming 24-year-old.

"This would be my present for myself, that, yes, I can eat that chocolate cake."

The sweet delight would be just the ticket for Safina, who normally is denied the luxury under the strict nutrition plan which has lifted her game over the past year.

Should she keep second seed Williams from a tenth career Grand Slam singles honour, Safina and elder sibling Marat would become the first brother-sister pair to ever hold top rankings.

Williams goes in with an edge, having won five of six encounters including two in 2008 against Safina. The 27-year-old American is on an odd-year streak at Melbourne Park with 2003, 2005 and 2007 titles.

"I'm excited that I'm playing really consistently, at least making it to the finals of Grand Slams," she said.

"As for number one, it's definitely more important for me to stay there than just to get there. Right now that would be just a bonus."

"My goal isn't to be number one, my goal is to now win one more match here at the Australian Open."

England coach Fabio Capello admitted on Thursday that he was undecided about whether or not to select David Beckham for next month's friendly against Spain after watching him play for AC Milan.

Beckham scored from a trademark freekick in Milan's 1-1 draw with Genoa at the San Siro and was given a rousing reception from the club's fans when he limped off 20 minutes from time with a groin problem.

## Wembley to host 2011 UCL final

AFP, Nyon

Wembley stadium was on Thursday chosen by UEFA to host the 2011 Champions League final with the same season's Europa League final, the former UEFA Cup, going to Dublin's new Lansdowne Road ground.

London and Dublin were named as venues for the two European showcase matches by UEFA's Executive Committee meeting in Nyon.

European football's governing body also named Munich's Allianz Arena as the venue for the 2012 Champions League final with Bucharest's National stadium hosting the 2012 Europa Cup final.

For the Republic of Ireland this will be the first time the country has staged a major European final with the venue, the new Lansdowne Road, still under construction.

This year's Champions League final is in Rome and the UEFA Cup final in Istanbul.

The decisions mean there will be two European finals held in Germany in the coming years as Hamburg will host the 2010 Europa Cup final.

The 2012 Champions League final will be held on a Saturday and is expected to generate up to 10 million euros for hotels, bars and restaurants in Munich.

"On behalf of the DFB, I would like to thank UEFA for this decision and it is a big reward for the authorities in the city which met the strict criteria," said German Football Federation president Dr Theo Zwanziger.

Milan also insist that their title chances are not over but midfielder playmaker Andrea Pirlo acknowledges that both teams on Sunday will be as desperate as each other for three points as Lazio too are still in with a chance of qualifying for Europe.

One problem for Milan is that new loan signing David Beckham may not be available as he had to be substituted in the second half against Genoa after injuring his groin.

If he is ruled out, coach Carlo Ancelotti will have to decide whether to replace him with Frenchman Mathieu Flamini or bring Clarence Seedorf back into the midfield and restore Ronaldinho to the starting line up alongside forward Pato, with Kaka dropping back to the hole behind the front pair.

In recent matches Kaka has played further forward with Seedorf in the hole behind the front two, a system that seemed to be working well.

Inter host lowly Torino and look in good form having beaten Catania 2-0 away on Wednesday despite playing for an hour with 10 men.

## Reds v Blues tops billing

AFP, London



Liverpool

have been warned that they must beat Chelsea this weekend or abandon their quest for the holy grail of a first English title since 1990.

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson up to his familiar psychological tricks?

No. It was one of Liverpool's own, Yossi Benayoun, who issued that stark assessment of the position that Rafael Benitez's squad now find themselves in after stumbling to draws in their last three league matches.

Dropping six points against Stoke, Everton and Wigan has resulted in Liverpool slipping to third in the table, behind Chelsea on goal difference and two points adrift of leaders United, who have the additional cushion of a game in hand.

United face a tough clash with Everton at Old Trafford on Saturday and a dauntingly intense run of matches at a time when Ferguson's squad is being stretched by injuries.

The subdued form of Fernando Torres since his comeback from the latest in a string of hamstring injuries has not helped Liverpool's cause.

Benitez desperately needs his star striker to rediscover the kind of form that saw him plunder 33 goals last season, his first in English football, although the manager would be quick to point out that

Torres was absent when Liverpool beat Chelsea 1-0 at Stamford Bridge in October.

Chelsea travel north having failed to beat any of their main rivals this season and midfielder Michael Ballack admitted that a draw might be an acceptable outcome to Sunday afternoon's encounter.

"Both sides will be trying to win because United have a game in hand and it is clear we need to win," the Germany captain said.

"But a draw is not a bad result. Anfield is a difficult place to go. Liverpool can be very focused on these big games."

Aston Villa's form -- a 1-0 win at Portsmouth in last week made it six away wins in a row for Martin O'Neill's side -- has piled the pressure on to Arsenal, who needed a stoppage time equaliser to draw at Everton and are now five points adrift of fourth-placed Villa.

Robin van Persie's late goal

extended Arsenal's unbeaten run in the league to nine matches and, with West Ham due at the Emirates on Saturday, the Gunners remain confident of breaking back into the top four and ensuring Champions League football next season.

Villa entertain a Wigan side that clearly missed the dynamism of Honduran midfielder Wilson Palacios in Wednesday's draw with Liverpool.

Sold to Tottenham for 14 million pounds, Palacios will make his Spurs debut at Bolton on Saturday.

Elsewhere, Hull will be desperate to end a run of six successive defeats when bottom side West Brom visit the KC Stadium.

Portsmouth, with just two league wins from 14 matches since Tony Adams took over from Harry Redknapp, also need to halt a downward slide and will hope to take something from their trip to Fulham.

Further down the table, Middlesbrough can leapfrog Blackburn and escape the relegation zone by beating Sam Allardyce's side at the Riverside while fellow strugglers Stoke entertain Manchester City in a lunch-time clash on Saturday.

Newcastle, who have been left reeling by the loss of both Michael Owen and Joey Barton to injury, entertain Sunderland on Sunday in a match neither of the north-east rivals can afford to lose.

### FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)

- Saturday  
 Arsenal v West Ham, Aston Villa v Wigan, Bolton v Tottenham, Fulham v Portsmouth, Hull v West Brom, Man Utd v Everton (1730 GMT), Middlesbrough v Blackburn, Stoke City v Man City (1245 GMT)  
 Sunday  
 Liverpool v Chelsea (1600 GMT), Newcastle v Sunderland (1330 GMT)

## Fabio unsure on Becks

### Football

AFP, Milan

England coach Fabio Capello admitted on Thursday that he was undecided about whether or not to select David Beckham for next month's friendly against Spain after watching him play for AC Milan.

Beckham scored from a trademark freekick in Milan's 1-1 draw with Genoa at the San Siro and was given a rousing reception from the club's fans when he limped off 20 minutes from time with a groin problem.

Manchester United and Real Madrid player needed to find a loan club to keep on playing or lose his place in Capello's England plans.

The midfielder's move has proved so successful, though, that the talk in Milan is about whether or not he will stay beyond the end of his proposed loan deal in March.

As for whether or not Beckham would be in Capello's plans for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, by which time the midfielder would be 35, the coach said: "We have to qualify first and only then will I think about who to select."

Capello was in the crowd but said he was not sure he would call up the 33-year-old former national team skipper for the friendly on February 7 in Seville.

"I still have to decide although I was pleased with the way Beckham played, which I thought was better than in his previous games," said Capello at a business awards ceremony here.

"I was at the San Siro to check on his form and before that I sent my assistants. It seems to me that he has fitted in very well at Milan."

Beckham is on loan from his club LA Galaxy because the Major League Soccer off season is so long that the former

Manchester United and Real Madrid player needed to find a loan club to keep on playing or lose his place in Capello's England plans.

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## Raul shifts focus

AFP, Madrid



LFP

Real Madrid captain Raul is looking for the goal that will take him level with the great Alfredo Di Stefano as the club's all-time leading scorer when Real travel to Numancia on Saturday.

Raul scored his 306th goal last weekend and has the chance to equal Di Stefano's mark and help Real cut Barcelona's lead at the top to 12 points.

"At the moment maybe it is easier to win a tenth European Cup than the league when you consider that Barca's form is not dipping," explained Raul.

"It's not impossible to overcome a deficit of 12 points, but if they (Barca) don't lose points it is not going to be possible to catch them."

While Raul has iconic status at Real, Dutch winger Royston Drenthe is finding out how demanding the fans can

be after being jeered when he came on as a substitute in the 1-0 win over Deportivo La Coruna last Sunday.

Klaas-Jan Huntelaar is another Dutchman finding the going tough at Madrid and is still waiting for his first Real goal since joining from Ajax for 20 million euros in January.

Barcelona travel to face Racing Santander on Sunday targeting a ninth consecutive victory to fend off Real who have put some pressure on with five straight league wins.

Barcelona president Joan Laporta recently accused Real of using the media to try and unsettle the pacesetters with reports about Lionel Messi switching to Madrid.

Messi seems unperturbed by the rumours and scored twice in the 4-1 thrashing over Numancia last time out.

"He should be left in peace, so he can focus on training," said coach Pep Guardiola.

"He looks better than ever. He's the owner of his future, he just needs to know that this is his home and we'll give him whatever help is necessary."

Barcelona's firepower has blown away teams this season and their three-pronged attack of Messi, Samuel Eto'o and Thierry Henry has scored a combined 45 goals - more than the entire Real Madrid team.

Barcelona need just two goals to make it 5,000 in the league but they are playing a Racing team that defeated high-flying Sevilla 2-0 last time out.

Serbian target-man Nikola Zigic has revitalised Racing since rejoining them on loan from Valencia and his 6ft 8in presence could cause

Barcelona's backline a few headaches.

Valencia slipped to a 3-1 defeat against Real Mallorca prompting coach Unai Emery to admit that he was to blame for the loss rather than the players.

Valencia sit fourth, four points behind Sevilla, with Emery hoping for a boost when his old side Almeria visit the Mestalla Stadium on Sunday.

Sevilla, three points behind Real, are at Sporting Gijon and Italian midfielder Enzo Maresca says his team are sometimes too worried about the threat posed by the opposition.

Atletico Madrid have yet to win in 2009 but are still only two points off the final Champions League spot going into Sunday's home match with Valladolid.

Atletico coach Javier Aguirre desperately needs a win to ease the growing pressure but Uruguayan forward Diego Forlan says the players must take responsibility for the slump.

### FIXTURES

- Saturday  
 Athletic Bilbao v Malaga, Numancia v Real Madrid  
 Sunday  
 Atletico Madrid v Valladolid, Real Betis v Getafe, Deportivo La Coruna v Villarreal, Espanyol v Recreativo Huelva, Racing Santander v Barcelona, Sporting Gijon v Sevilla, Valencia v Almeria, Osasuna v Real Mallorca

## Bayern wait on duo

AFP, Berlin

The future of Bayern Munich captain Mark van Bommel and fellow midfielder Ze Roberto is expected to be decided by the middle of next month, the reigning Bundesliga champions said Thursday.

Both van Bommel, 31, and Ze Roberto, 34, are out of contract this June and they have been offered a year's extension to their current deal, but the club are waiting on a decision from the pair.

"However, if either player needs an extra week or two to make up their mind, that is no problem," said Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann.

Ze Roberto is in his second stint at Bayern, having rejoined in 2007, but has hinted he would like to play his football in North America.

"I do not know yet what will come from the discussions with manager Uli Hoeneß, but I like the club a lot," said the Brazilian.

But Klinsmann is a self-confessed Ze Roberto fan and says he wants the Brazilian to stay.

## Rivals remain defiant

AFP, Rome



LEGA CALCIO

despite both dropping valuable points in midweek.

Milan were held to a 1-1 draw at home to Genoa and face a tough trip to the capital to play Lazio on Sunday, with an eight-point deficit to leaders Inter Milan.

Juventus are only two points better off after they were stunned 2-1 at Udinese, who had not won in their previous 11 matches.

With a home clash against interim Cagliari and the red-hot forward Robert Acquafresca to come on Saturday, the pressure is on them as much as it is on Milan to try to cling onto Inter's coat-tails.

While that defeat dropped Juve to six points off the champions, there is some good news coming out of Turin as coach Claudio Ranieri has seen several top stars return from the treatment table.

Striker Vincenzo Iaquinta started against Udinese and

scored a penalty while French forward David Trezeguet made his first appearance since September when he came on as a substitute for Amauri with 10 minutes left.

Goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon was also back between the sticks while Italy pair, centre-back Giorgio Chiellini and midfielder Mauro Camoranesi are also due back soon.

Cagliari are pushing for a UEFA Cup finish and have won three of their four matches since the end of the winter break, with their only dropped points coming in a 1-1 draw at the San Siro against Inter.

The challenge facing Milan is no less daunting as they travel to a Lazio wounded by two straight defeats, including

a 4-1 loss at home to Cagliari.

Milan also insist that their title chances are not over but midfielder playmaker Andrea Pirlo acknowledges that both teams on Sunday will be as desperate as each other for three points as Lazio too are still in with a chance of qualifying for Europe.

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### FIXTURES

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 Juventus v Cagliari, Napoli v Udinese  
 Sunday  
 Atalanta v Catania, Bologna v Fiorentina, Chievo v Sampdoria, Genoa v Palermo, Inter Milan v Torino, Lazio v AC Milan, Reggina v AS Roma, Siena v Lecce



Barcelona starlet Bojan Krkic runs off to celebrate his goal against Espanyol during their King's Cup clash at Nou Camp on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP