

SHARAPOVA V AZARENKA

Title plus ranking on the line

AFP, Melbourne



Three-time Grand Slam champion Maria Sharapova takes on debut finalist Victoria Azarenka Saturday in a high-stakes battle for the Australian Open title and the top ranking. Sharapova won Wimbledon as a 17-year-old in 2004, captured the US Open in 2006 and the Australian Open in 2008 but a nine-month injury lay-off with shoulder problems starting

later that year saw her tumble down the rankings. The former world number one, seeded fourth in Melbourne, reached the semi-finals at last year's French Open and the final at Wimbledon as she continued her rise back to the top of the game.

Now she has the chance once again to top the rankings, with the winner of the final guaranteed to replace Caroline Wozniacki as number one.

Azarenka, by contrast, has little pedigree at the sharp end of grand slam tournaments, with her best performance coming at last year's Wimbledon, where she reached the semi-finals.

But Sharapova, 24, said experience was not everything as last year's final at the All England Club showed when she lost out to Petra Kvitova, playing in her first grand slam title match.

"I played Petra in her first grand slam final," the Russian said. "She played really high quality tennis out there on the grass, and she went out there and it didn't really affect her."

"Even though Victoria hasn't really been in that stage of a grand slam before, she's certainly won big titles and she has the experience."

"This is a stage she's wanted to be at for a long time, so I do expect her to play really good tennis."

A smiling Azarenka, 22, said she had grown as a player and learned from previous experiences.

Two years ago in Melbourne she had Serena Williams on the ropes in the quarter-finals, leading by a set and 4-0 before letting the eventual champion off the hook.

"I had, how do you call it, meltdowns? There you go," a relaxed Azarenka said.

"Yeah, I had some. For sure you can see some on YouTube. But, you know, I grow as a player, I grow as a person, and I try to learn from my mistakes and make it better."

"So I'm proud of what I'm doing. I just want to keep going and keep raising that level."

She said she was looking forward to the challenge of playing Sharapova, who plays a similar power game from the baseline.

"I think she's a very tough opponent. She's been in the finals here, she won here, so definitely she has a lot of experience," the Belarusian said.

"We always had difficult matches, so I'm really looking forward to that battle. It's not going to be easy."

Azarenka said she was not worried about Sharapova's greater experience in majors.

"It's no concern for me. I worked hard to be in this situation, so why stress about it?" she said. "I want it and that's what I'm looking for, so I'm just going to go out there and try to do my best."

The two have played six times previously with three wins apiece. In the two finals they have contested the Belarusian has come out on top. But Azarenka was quick to downplay those results.

"I think it's very different. You cannot really look back," she said. "It's always difficult to play somebody you've beaten before, they have extra motivation to beat you."

"What more motivation can you have than playing in a grand slam final, right?"

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Head-to-head record for Victoria Azarenka and Maria Sharapova ahead of the Australian Open women's final on Saturday (x denotes seeding):

Victoria Azarenka (BLR x3) v Maria Sharapova (RUS x4)
Series tied 3-3

2007 Moscow, carpet, round of 16, Azarenka 7-6 (11/9), 6-2

2009 Los Angeles, hard, round of 32, Sharapova 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 6-2

2009 Beijing, hard, round of 32, Sharapova 6-3, 6-7 (5/7), 7-5

2010 Stanford, hard, final, Azarenka 6-4, 6-1

2011 Miami, hard, final, Azarenka 6-1, 6-4



MARIA SHARAPOVA



VICTORIA AZARENKA

No pool

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clubs during the three-day transfer and Usha Kriya Chakra roped in all 11 of them in special consideration through consensus of all the participating clubs.

Meanwhile, 25 players, who spoiled the Youth Hockey Championship final last year by entering the turf in the middle of the match, may be considered ineligible for the transfer if they again ignore the show-cause notice served by the BHF as they have not replied to the first show-cause notice, he added.

The meeting approved of the league committee decisions of registering five foreign players and allowing four players in each match and decided that the three-day transfer will open on February 26.

The meeting also decided in principle to send the national hockey team in the AHF Cup subject to the availability of sponsors. The tournament will be held in Hong Kong from April 6-15.

"If we can ensure the sponsors, we will take part in the tournament where we emerged champions in the last meet in Singapore and qualified for the Asia Cup," said Rahmatullah adding that they need Tk 34 lakhs including expenditure for training. NSC has expressed its inability to bear the expenditure of the national hockey team.

BJMC clinch

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had to be content with a runners-up trophy.

The champions received Tk 40,000 and runners-up were given Tk 20,000. Sabina Khatun of BJMC was awarded the highest scorer while Farhana Khatun of Sheltech was adjudged the best player of the league.

India face wipeout

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But they were soon in trouble, losing Gautam Gambhir for 13 in the fifth over, caught behind off Ryan Harris.

Stand-in skipper Virender Sehwag blasted 12 fours in a rollicking 62 off 53 balls before he skied a full toss from spinner Lyon only to Ricky Ponting in the covers.

Rahul Dravid lasted 71 balls before he edged to Mike Hussey in the gully off Harris for 25 to complete a poor series in which he was bowled six times and scored just 194 runs at 24.25.

Tendulkar again missed out on his elusive 100th international hundred when he was caught close to the wicket by Ed Cowan off Lyon for 13.

Tendulkar's latest failure stretched Test cricket's all-time leading runscore's barren run without a century to 25 Test and one-day innings since his last hundred (111) in

the World Cup last March.

The highest winning chase at the Adelaide Oval is Australia's 315 against England in 1902, while India's highest-ever run hunt was 406 against the West Indies in Trinidad in 1976.

Earlier, former captain Ponting was 60 not out when Michael Clarke declared Australia's innings for a second time in the match after calling a halt in the first innings at 604 for seven.

SCOREBOARD

AUSTRALIA: First innings 604 for 7 decd (Ponting 221, Clarke 210; Ashwin 3-194)

INDIA: First innings 272 (Kohli 116; Siddle 5-49)

AUSTRALIA: Second innings (50 for 3 overnight)

Warner c & b Ashwin 28
Cowan lbw b Ashwin 10

Marsh lbw b Zaheer 0
Ponting not out 60

Harris 14 4 25 2
Clarke c Saha b Yadav 37

Hilfenhaus 9 2 33 0
Hussey lbw b Sharma 15

Siddle 10 3 36 0
Lyon 11 19 3 57 3

Extras: (lb-6) 6
Total: (For 5 wkts decd for in 43 overs) 167

Did not bat: Siddle, Harris, Hilfenhaus, Lyon.
Fall of wickets: 1-39, 2-40, 3-40, 4-111, 5-147.

Bowler O M R W
Zaheer 13 1 38 1

Ashwin 20 2 73 2
Sharma 8 0 27 1

Yadav 5 0 23 1

INDIA: Second innings

Gambhir c Haddin b Harris 3

Sehwag c Ponting b Lyon 62

Dravid c Hussey b Harris 25

Tendulkar c Cowan b Lyon 13

Laxman c Marsh b Lyon 35

Kohli run out (Hilfenhaus) 22

Extras: (lb-3, w-1) 4

Saha not out 0

India 28
Total: (For 6 wkts in 56 overs) 166

To bat: Ashwin, Zaheer, Yadav.
Fall of wickets: 1-14, 2-80, 3-100, 4-110, 5-162, 6-166.

Bowler O M R W
Harris 14 4 25 2

Hilfenhaus 9 2 33 0

Siddle 10 3 36 0

Lyon 11 19 3 57 3

Russain pair wins doubles title

AFP, Melbourne

Unseeded Svetlana Kuznetsova and Vera Zvonareva won the Australian Open women's doubles crown on Friday, coming from behind to beat Italian pair Roberta Vinci and Sara Errani in three sets.

The Russians overcame a poor start from Zvonareva in particular to win the title 5-7, 6-4, 6-3 on Rod Laver Arena, but were quick to downplay any implications for the Olympic Games later this year.

Vinci and Errani are Fed Cup stalwarts for Italy and have won all five Fed Cup doubles matches they have played. Kuznetsova and Zvonareva rarely play together and only decided to team up for Melbourne at the last moment.

"I think we decided the night before sign-in was closing," Kuznetsova said. "Because we focus on singles, sometimes I go to a grand slam and I don't know if I'm going to play or not in the doubles."

Zvonareva insisted they weren't thinking of the Olympics when they opted to play doubles in Melbourne.

"It's not our main focus," she said. "Long-term, you know, we don't know. It depends because we have so many great players that can play good in singles and doubles."

"And I think both of us, we will try to make it to the Olympics in singles. That's the most important thing. If we get chosen for doubles, we get chosen."

The Russians started slowly with the Italians looking far more comfortable early on with superior movement and better teamwork.

Vinci and Errani were deadly at the net, intercepting the powerful ground strokes of the Russians and winning points with deft volleys.

Rana, Mamun elected to BSWA office

SPORTS REPORTER

Hasan Ullah Khan Rana and Mostafa Mamun were elected president and general secretary respectively in the Bangladesh Sports Writers' Association poll held at the National Sports Council yesterday.

Rana, sports editor of Daily Shamakal, defeated incumbent president Rezaur Rahman Shohag, sports editor of Daily Inqilab by 36 votes as Rana bagged 86 votes as opposed to Shohag's 50 votes out of an electoral of 142.

Mostafa Mamun, sports editor of Daily Kaler Khantho, defeated AKM Kamruzzaman Hiru, senior reporter of Daily Sangram, by 22 votes with Mamun bagging 79 votes while Hiru got 57 votes.

Other office bearers are vice president Arif Shohel, joint secretary Sikandar Ali, treasurer Rakibur Rahman, organising secretary Kazi Shahidul Alam and members Selim Nazrul Haque, Ekramuzzaman, Talha Bin Nazrul, Sanaul Haque, Anwarullah and Rafiqul Islam Mia.

Local snippets

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Feni cricket

Mohammedan Sporting Club defeated Brothers Union by 51 runs in the Beacon Group First Division Cricket League at the Shaheed salam Stadium in Feni yesterday. Mohammedan got their opponents bowled out for 86 runs after putting on 137. Pilu took five wickets for Mohammedan.

Walton in semis

Walton emerged Group A champions to move to the semi-finals of the Lankabangla T20 Corporate Cricket League after defeating Union Capital by 79 runs in their group match yesterday. Batting first, Walton set up a massive score of 251 for five, thanks to a 34-ball 77 from Mir Sohan. Sohan later took two wickets as Union Capital managed to score 172 for six in their allotted 20 overs. Sohan was adjudged man of the match.



England spinner Monty Panesar appeals successfully for an LBW against Pakistan batsman Mohammad Hafeez on the third day of the second Test at the Sheikh Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pak try to hold off Eng



AFP, Abu Dhabi

Pakistan were left with a battle to avoid conceding England a series-levelling win after Monty Panesar proved threatening with three wickets in the second Test here on Friday.

After Panesar had taken 3-44, it was left to Azhar Ali (46) and Asad Shafiq (35) to put on a 71-run stand for the fifth wicket to lift Pakistan to 125-4 at the close on the third day on a weary Abu Dhabi Stadium pitch.

Ali joined Shafiq with Pakistan reeling at 54-4, as Panesar dismissed Mohammad Hafeez (22), Younis Khan (one) and Misbah-ul Haq (12) in his sustained 20-over spell on either side of the tea interval.

But both youngsters helped Pakistan erase the 70-run lead and promised to steer their team around the trouble on a spin-assisted pitch on Saturday. Pakistan lead by 55 runs with six wickets intact.

Pakistan will look to their remaining batsmen to help produce a formidable target for England to maintain their chances in the series, which they lead by 1-0 on account of a ten-wicket win in the first Test at Dubai.

Stuart Broad gave England a crucial 70-run lead with an unbeaten 58 which took England to 327 in the morning session.

Both Ali and Shafiq defied England's pace-cum spin attack in the last session much to the delight of a near

5,000 holiday crowd. Ali has so far hit seven boundaries to Shafiq's three.

As expected, Panesar came over to bowl as early as the sixth over and struck in his fourth when he spun across Hafeez's bat to hit him on the knees, right in front of the stumps.

Panesar's spin partner Graeme Swann made it 29-2 when he beat Umar's forward push with a delivery that came straight with the arm. Umar made seven.

It became 36-3 when Panesar spun one across Younis's bat and hit the off-stump, and Pensar struck again in the second over after resumption, catching Misbah in front of the wicket for 12.

The Pakistani skipper's challenge against Australian umpire Bruce Oxenford's decision proved unsuccessful.

Earlier, Broad added an invaluable 41 for the seventh wicket with Ian Bell (29) and 36 for the ninth wicket with James Anderson (13) to boost England after they resumed at 207-5, 50 runs behind on Pakistan's first innings total.

Pakistan fared poorly in the field as Matt Prior was dropped on two by Junaid Khan in just the second over of the day, while Bell was let off on nine by Abdul Rehman off his own bowling.

But Prior's lapse didn't prove costly as a threatening Saeed Ajmal trapped him leg-before in his next over for three.

Broad successfully attacked the bowling, hitting two boundaries each off Ajmal and then off Umar Gul - after Pakistan took the sec-

ond new ball with the score at 250-6 -- to take England past Pakistan's total.

Gul struck in his next over when he trapped Bell before and Rehman accounted for Swann (15).

Broad hit six boundaries and a six off just 62-balls. Ajmal finished with 4-108, while Hafeez took three and Rehman two.

SCOREBOARD

PAKISTAN: First innings 257

ENGLAND: First innings (overnight 207-5)

Strauss c Shafiq b Hafeez 11

Cook lbw b Ajmal 94

Trott b Rehman 74

Pietersen c Hafeez b Ajmal 14

Bell lbw b Gul 29

Morgan c Hafeez b Ajmal 3

Prior lbw b Ajmal 3

Broad not out 58

Swann lbw b Rehman 15

Anderson b Hafeez 13

Panesar lbw b Hafeez 0

Extras: (b-5, lb-7, nb-1) 13

Total: (All out in 112 overs) 327

Fall of wickets: 1-27, 2-166, 3-198, 4-203, 5-207, 6-227, 7-268, 8-291, 9-327.

Bowler O M R W

Gul 13 1 53 1

Junaid 8 0 33 0

Hafeez 22 4 54 3

Ajmal 40 6 108 4

Rehman 29 9 67 2

PAKISTAN: Second innings

Hafeez lbw b Panesar 22

Umar b Swann 7

Azhar not out 46

Younis b Panesar 41

Misbah lbw b Panesar 12

Shafiq not out 35

Extras: (lb-2) 2

Total: (For four wkts in 61 overs) 125

To bat: Akmal, Rehman, Gul, Ajmal, Junaid.

Fall of wickets: 1-29, 2-29, 3-36, 4-54.

Bowler O M R W

Anderson 10 2 31 0

Broad 11 6 16 0

Rain halts Kiwis



AFP, Napier

Torrential rain dashed New Zealand's hopes of building an imposing first-innings lead in the one-off Test against Zimbabwe on Friday, with an injury to captain Ross Taylor further frustrating the home side.

The New Zealanders began the day at 331 for five and looked to be comfortably approaching Taylor's stated target of 450-plus as they advanced to 392 without further loss.

But a downpour ended play mid-way through the first session and officials abandoned play late in the afternoon when it became apparent the weather would not clear.

In a further setback for the Black Caps, Taylor was forced to retire hurt early in the day after taking his overnight score of 111 to 122.

He took off for a quick single but pulled up mid-wicket clutching his right calf and limped to the non-striker's end, unable to continue despite on-field treatment from the team physio.

Under rule changes introduced in October, Taylor was unable to call for a runner, bringing tail-ender Doug Bracewell to the crease.

Bracewell should have been dismissed two overs later but was given a life when Forster Mutizwa grounded an easy catch at extra cover.

BJ Watling, shouldering responsibility as the last established batsman, upped the tempo after previously contenting himself with a support role and brought up his half century just before the heavens opened.

Watling ended the day on 52 not out, with Bracewell on 11. With fine weather fore-

cast for Saturday, New Zealand will be looking to add runs early and hoping an attack that includes four seamers can find the penetration that has so far eluded Zimbabwe's bowlers.

There have only been two results in nine Tests at Napier and New Zealand have never won at the venue.

SCOREBOARD

NEW ZEALAND: First innings (331 for five overnight)

McCullum lbw b Jarvis 83

Guptill c Taibu b Masakadza 51

Williamson run out 4

Taylor retired hurt 122

Brownlie c Taibu b H Masakadza 0

Vettori st Taibu b Cremer 38

Watling not out 52

Bracewell 11

Extras: (lb-21, w-2, nb-8) 31

Total: (For 5 wkts in 105.2 overs) 392

Fall of wickets: 1-124, 2-131, 3-195, 4-196, 5-278.

Bowler O M R W

Jarvis 26 6 76 1

Vitori 22.2 3 89 0