

Serena and Maria to battle it out

AFP, Paris



Serena Williams blitzed hapless Sara Errani 6-0, 6-1 in just 46 minutes on Thursday to reach her second French Open final where she'll face defending champion Maria Sharapova for the title.

The American top seed, who won her only Roland Garros crown on her last final appearance in 2002, will be playing in her 20th career Grand Slam championship showdown after stretching her current winning streak to 30 matches.

Williams, at 1.75m and 70kg, was just too powerful for Errani, the runner-up in 2012, but whose slight stature of 1.64m and 60kg, was never going to intimidate the American.

Williams blasted 40 winners to Errani's two while the Italian won just five points on the American's serve.

"I told myself: 'Serena, just concentrate' and that's what I did," said Williams, who had been pushed to three sets and almost two hours by quarter-final opponent Svetlana Kuznetsova.

"Against Maria, I will have to prepare

slightly differently. She's a great player. But it's magnificent to be back in the final after 11 years."

The 31-year-old will start Saturday's final as the comfortable favourite as she holds a 13-2 career lead over Sharapova with the Russian's last triumph coming nine years ago.

The world number one raced through the first set on Thursday in just 21 minutes, firing 18 winners past the Italian fifth seed and allowing her opponent a meagre two points on serve.

It wasn't all raw power, however, with the top seed winning one point in sixth game of the opening set with a sweet, backhand volley hit from almost behind her.

With Errani, who had lost all of her five previous meetings with the 15-time Grand Slam title winner, was playing with a bandaged right thigh and her hopes continued to sink.

The 26-year-old from Bologna was quickly 3-0 down in the second set, before she finally got on the scoreboard in the fourth game.

It was only a brief pause in the onslaught as Williams sent down another love game for 4-1 and then broke for the fifth time to stretch out to 5-1.



PHOTO: AFP

Russia's Maria Sharapova celebrates her victory over Belarus's Victoria Azarenka in their French Open semifinal at Roland Garros yesterday.

Div I b'ball tomorrow

SPORTS REPORTER

The Citycell First Division Basketball League gets underway from Saturday at the Dhanmondi Basketball Gymnasium with seven teams taking part.

Seven teams will fight for two spots for the 10-team Premier Division Basketball League but there will be no relegation, informed Bangladesh Basketball Federation general secretary AK Sarker at a press conference. He added that a few clubs have been trying to rope in foreign cagers.

Replying to a query, Sarker said that the wooden floor at the gymnasium is now much better than it has been previously and the players would almost have zero risk of getting injured.

Mayor Cup Int'l chess

SPORTS REPORTER

After their poor performance in the Kiit International Chess Festival in Bhubaneswar last month, GM Enamul Hossain Razib and GM Ziaur Rahman continued their dismal performance to finish 41th and 44th respectively in the Sixth Mayor Cup International Tournament completed in Mumbai yesterday.

Razib beat Phadke Sohan to earn six points, equal to Zia, who lost to Suniliduth Lyna Narayanan in the last and 11th round.

Ribery to stay till 2017

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich's Franck Ribery has signed a 2-year contract extension to remain with the Champions League winners until 2017 and central defender Daniel van Buyten will stay on for another season, the club said on Thursday.

"We are delighted to have kept two key players with us," said Bayern CEO Karl-Heinz Rummenigge in a statement.

Frenchman Ribery, 30, enjoyed his most successful season since joining in 2007, scoring 10 goals in the Bundesliga and setting up another 14.

The deal will also be welcomed by Pep Guardiola, the former Barcelona coach who takes over at Bayern this month, with Bayern having also signed midfielder Mario Goetze from rivals Borussia Dortmund for next season.

Brazil fall to record low

REUTERS, Undated



Five-times world champions Brazil plummeted further down the FIFA rankings as they hit a record low of 22nd place on Thursday, leaving them sandwiched between Ghana and Mali.

The latest rankings were also hugely embarrassing for Asia, whose highest-placed team Japan were a modest 32nd, with South Korea and Australia the region's only other teams in the top 50.

Brazil's low position is a combination of their lacklustre recent results, including four draws in their last six games, and their lack of competitive internationals.

Brazil, who qualify automatically for next year's World Cup as hosts, have spent the last two years playing only friendlies, which earn fewer points under the complex calculation system.

Mali were among four teams who reached their highest-ever ranking, alongside Belgium (12th), Bosnia (15th) and Albania (38th).

Oceania champions Tahiti will head for the Confederations Cup in 138th position after dropping three places. They will face Nigeria, Uruguay and European champions Spain, who continued to lead the rankings. There was no change in the top four with Germany, Argentina and Croatia trailing Vicente del Bosque's side.

RANKINGS:

1. (1) Spain
2. (2) Germany
3. (3) Argentina
4. (4) Croatia
5. (9) Netherlands
6. (5) Portugal
7. (6) Colombia
8. (8) Italy
9. (7) England
10. (10) Ecuador

Suarez puts France to sword

REUTERS, Montevideo

Substitute Luis Suarez scored after less than five minutes on the pitch to give Uruguay a 1-0 win over France in an international friendly at the Centenario on Wednesday.

Suarez, who came on for the second half in place of Diego Forlan, scored with a diagonal shot into the bottom corner in the 49th minute after evading defender Eliaquim Mangala to take a pass from Maxi Pereira.

The striker did not start with Uruguay using the match as a warm-up for a critical World Cup qualifier in Venezuela on Tuesday that Suarez will miss through suspension.

Uruguay had the better of the opening exchanges with striker Edinson Cavani dangerous in front of Steve Mandanda's goal.

France, whose tour also includes a match against 2014 World Cup hosts Brazil on Sunday, then took control of the ball and Uruguay goalkeeper Fernando Muslera was forced to make several saves.

Schuerrle deal puts Ballack in the shade

REUTERS, Berlin



Former Germany captain Michael Ballack's farewell match in Leipzig on Wednesday was overshadowed by the potential transfer of Andre Schuerrle to Chelsea with German media reporting a deal has been agreed.

New Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho, who coached Ballack at the English club, was in Leipzig and the long-sSpeculated transfer of Bayer Leverkusen winger Schuerrle to the Premier League club looked to be heading towards completion.

Mourinho himself refused to confirm or deny it, telling reporters: "We will see."

German newspaper Express, however, said the deal had been finalised after a meeting in Germany between Mourinho and Leverkusen sports director Rudi Voeller.

The rapid 22-year-old Schuerrle joined Leverkusen from Mainz 05 in 2011 and has become a regular for Germany, battling for a starting spot with Lukas Podolski.

Ballack, who won 98 caps for Germany and led them to the 2002 World Cup and Euro 2008 finals, played for clubs including Chelsea, Bayern Munich, Bayer Leverkusen and Kaiserslautern.

Some 50,000 fans filled the stadium to see him play against former colleagues, including Didier Drogba, Michael Essien and Torsten Frings.

Ballack, who started his career at Chemnitzer FC, won a string of domestic club trophies in Germany and England but failed to claim a major European or world title despite coming close on several occasions.

A proposed final Germany appearance last year was rejected by Ballack who was angry with federation officials and coach Joachim Loew because of the way his international career ended after injury ruled him out of the 2010 World Cup.

Neymar refutes Ronaldinho comparison

REUTERS, Barcelona



Barcelona's new signing Neymar is determined to leave his mark on the club but has acknowledged he has a long way to go before he can join the likes of Brazilian compatriot Ronaldinho on the list of Barca legends.

The 21-year-old forward, who has joined Barca from Santos for a fee of 57 million euros (\$75 million), played down comparisons with Ronaldinho, who spent five seasons in the Catalan capital and won two La Liga titles and one Champions League crown.

"You cannot compare anyone with Ronaldinho," Neymar said in an interview with Barca TV broadcast on Wednesday.

"He made history at Barcelona, he made history in the Brazil national team and he continues to make history," he added.

"In my case I am only just starting to make history and I also hope to be able to leave my mark here in Barcelona."

Neymar will line up in a fearsome Barca forward line alongside idol Lionel Messi next season as the club seek a fifth La Liga title in six years and a fifth European crown.

Neymar faced Barca playing for Santos in the final of the 2011 Club World Cup and he said that on that day, when Barcelona crushed the Brazilian side 4-0, he learned to play football.

"What struck me most was the simplicity of Barca's play," he told Barca TV.

"The simplicity they were able to impose on every game was sensational," he added.

"Barca left everyone open-mouthed. Not just the Barca fans or the media but even the Santos players."



Former Germany captain Michael Ballack bids bye to fans at the end of his farewell match in Leipzig on Wednesday. Didier Drogba, Philipp Lahm, Andriy Shevchenko, Miroslav Klose, Lothar Matthaus and Michael Schumacher all played as Jose Mourinho acted as manager.

PHOTO: AFP



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