

SPORT



Maria Sharapova of Russia erupts with joy after winning the French Open women's singles final against Romanian Simona Halep at Roland Garros in Paris yesterday. Sharapova won 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-4.

PHOTO: AFP

Sharapova's 2nd title

REUTERS, Paris



Maria Sharapova claimed her second French Open title when she floored Romanian fourth seed Simona Halep 6-4 6-7(5) 6-4 after a marathon encounter in Saturday's final.

The seventh seed from Russia claimed her fifth grand slam title after Wimbledon 2004, the 2006 US Open, the 2008 Australian Open and her first Roland Garros title two years ago.

Halep, who had not lost a set entering the final, put up a great fight but bowed out after three hours and two minutes - the longest women's final in Paris since 1996.

Sharapova wrapped it up on her first match point when Halep could not return one of her opponent's sizzling forehands.

"This is the toughest grand slam final I have ever played. I respect Simona a lot, I thought she played an unbelievable match today," Sharapova said with smudged mascara under her eyes.

"I can't believe it, seven or eight years ago I would not have thought that I would win more Roland Garros than any other grand slam.

"To think I won it twice... I'm so emotional now I can't talk."

The wily Romanian had forced a decider just as Sharapova seemed to have ended her resistance.

The Russian, however, had won the last 19 three-set matches she had played on clay since losing to Justine Henin in the third round at Roland Garros in 2010 and made it

20 with a characteristically gutsy display.

Halep, hoping to become the second Romanian woman to win a grand slam title after her manager Virginia Ruzici won at Roland Garros in 1978, broke in the first game of the match when Sharapova sent a backhand long despite having an open court at her disposal.

Sharapova unsettled Halep with her crosscourt shots but the Romanian held on for 2-0.

The Russian bombarded Halep with powerful forehands and managed to break back for 2-2 on her fourth chance when Halep's crosscourt backhand went wide.

Sharapova's third double fault gave Halep another break point, which the Russian saved with another forehand winner down the line before holding for 3-2 after four deuces.

The Russian broke for 4-2, went to 5-2 and then lost two games before taking the set on her opponent's serve when Halep fired a crosscourt forehand wide.

Sharapova won the first game of the second set to love and broke in the second with the contest seemingly heading for a swift conclusion.

Halep would not give up, however, and broke back by forcing Sharapova to net a backhand as the crowd roared "Simona, Simona".

They exchanged four breaks in a row as the set went into a tiebreak and the clock ticked past the two-hour mark. Halep went 5-3 down but then scored four points in a row to send the match into a deciding set.

Siddikur on a roll

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's ace golfer Siddikur Rahman fired a stunning seven-under-par (64) in the third round of the Queen's Cup on Saturday to move into contention for a third Asian Tour victory.

The two-time Asian Tour winner, who started the day at joint fourth position, had an impeccable third round yesterday at the Santiburi Samui Country Club as he fired seven birdies while remaining bogeyless throughout the day. That performance gave him an aggregate of 11-under-par (202), one shot behind leader Poom Saksansin of Thailand.

"It was really a great round. I'm really happy, especially with my putting which I got back. My hitting was excellent, overall it was very good," Siddikur told Asiantour.com, after the day's play.

Shoaib, 38, to marry Rubab, who is 17!

NDTV, Delhi

Once the most feared fast bowler in the world, Shoaib Akhtar has finally decided to marry. The Rawalpindi Express, who last played an international match -- ODI -- in March 2011, will reportedly marry 17-year-old Rubab, the daughter of a businessman.

Akhtar, who was recently seen on TV as an expert during the Indian Premier League 2014, has made headlines several times during his 15-year-old international career both with his cricketing exploits and off-field endeavours. His upcoming wedding in the third week of June, will surely grab the spotlight once again.

According to reports in Pakistan media, Akhtar turns 39 in August and is visiting his hometown Rawalpindi on June 12 to finalise details of his wedding with Rubab, who has three elder brothers and a younger sister. Rubab appeared in intermediate examination in Abbottabad only last month.

Reports say Akhtar's family met Mushtaq Khan, a businessman from Haripur, while on Haj last year and discussions of a marriage started soon after. Rubab is not a cricket fan, but Akhtar is not only about cricket.

Klose breaks Mueller's record

AFP, Mainz



Veteran striker Miroslav Klose became Germany's all-time top-scorer on Friday when he netted his 69th goal in his 132nd appearance in their 6-1 friendly romp against Armenia.

The hot-shot, who turns 36 on Monday, came off the bench to head Germany's fourth goal as they scored five goals in the final 17 minutes in their last World Cup warm-up match.

Klose bettered the previous record set by Gerd Mueller, who scored the winner in the 1974 World Cup final to claim his 68th goal in 62 appearances for West Germany.

"Of course, the goal record means a lot to me, but it was more important for us to be in form," said Klose, who has endured an injury-ravaged season for Lazio.

"When we play as well as we did in the second-half, then we create plenty of chances and I'll score goals.

"It was important that we had more pressure in the penalty area and had more movement in the box.

"I want to play and I know I can help the team," added Klose, as he now looks ahead to his fourth World Cup.

As the only recognised striker in the Germany squad, Klose can claim more records in Brazil where he is just one short of Ronaldo's record of 15 goals in World Cup finals.

Germany open their Group G campaign against Portugal in Salvador on June 16 and also face Ghana and the USA in the first round.

Albiceleste's fab four

AFP, Buenos Aires



Lionel Messi, Gonzalo Higuain, Sergio Aguero and Angel di Maria form one of the most sublime attacking forces in football, but their goals may not be enough to win the World Cup for

Argentina.

Los Cuatro Fantasticos, as fans call them, are all 26, came through Argentina's ranks together and are hitting the peak of their careers.

Coach Alejandro Sabella is spoiled for choice as he takes his fancied team to the World Cup to take on Nigeria, Bosnia and Iran in Group F.

Barcelona's Messi has deposed Diego Maradona as Argentina's leading scorer -- with 37 strikes in 85 appearances -- and is rated as the world's most valuable footballer.

Higuain, of Italian side Napoli, has 22 goals from 36 internationals; Aguero, who has just won the English title with Manchester City, 21 goals from 50 games and di Maria, triumphant in the Champions League with Real Madrid, 11 goals from 45 games.

Sabella could play them any way he wants and that kind of firepower has made Argentina second favourites to win the cup, behind Brazil.

The coach struggled however to get the right formation after he arrived in

September 2011.

"Today the team plays with three attackers (Messi, Aguero and Higuain) of an extraordinary level, plus di Maria, who is a fourth attacker," said Sabella.

Di Maria normally plays an offensive midfield role for Argentina.

"It is very difficult to take one out," Sabella added. "But we are going to continue like this."

Even if one of the fab four is injured, Sabella has plenty of support to fall back on.

Carlos Tevez could not even make the Argentine squad despite a brilliant season with Juventus. Sabella could not handle managing a squad with Messi and Tevez.

But he still has Rodrigo Palacio of Inter Milan and Ezequiel Lavezzi of Paris St Germain, who both got games in the 3-0 friendly win over Trinidad and Tobago on Wednesday.

Aguero and Higuain were rested for that match.

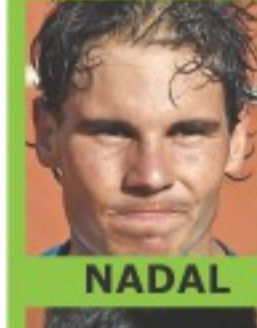
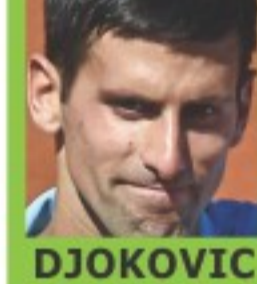
Normally Sabella plays Higuain as the target man, Aguero on the left, di Maria in midfield and Messi marauding on the right.

The lineup makes Argentina a huge threat on the counter-attack.

Messi cast aside some of the weight of playing for the national team, scoring 18 goals in his last 16 games, including World Cup qualifying.

But Sabella makes frequent changes to the formation and the rest of the team poses problems for him.

HISTORY either way

NADAL v DJOKOVIC		
	Wins 22	Wins 19
	Ranking: 1	Ranking: 2
	Age: 28	Age: 27
	Height: 6'1"	Height: 6'2"
	Plays: Left-handed	Plays: Right-handed
	Turned Pro: 2001	Turned Pro: 2003
	Singles titles: 63	Singles titles: 44

AFP, Paris

Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic clash for a 42nd time on Sunday with the French Open title and a place in the record books at stake.

World number one Nadal hopes to wrap up a ninth triumph in nine finals in Paris and take his record to 66 wins and just one defeat.

Victory would also make the 28-year-old the first man to win Roland Garros five years in a row and give him a 14th Grand Slam title, just three behind the record of 17 held by Roger Federer who is nearly five years older.

Djokovic, who has six majors to his name, needs a Roland Garros trophy to become just the eighth man in history to have won all four Grand Slam events.

He also has the advantage of having defeated Nadal in their last four meetings, including on clay in the Rome Masters final last month.

The momentum, however, appears to be with Nadal who allowed Wimbledon champion Andy Murray just six games in a brutal semifinal demolition on Friday.

"It's nothing new for Novak to be in the final here. He has the motivation to win Roland Garros for the first time for sure," said Nadal who has won their last three Grand Slam meetings and all four of their previous encounters at Roland Garros.

"But at the same time, he has the pressure to win for the first time."

Djokovic was defeated by Nadal in the 2012 final but came desperately close to beating him in the semifinals in 2013 when he led 4-2 in the final set.

The 27-year-old Serb, who is playing in his 13th Grand Slam final compared to Nadal's 20th, believes the key to victory is to take the Spaniard out of his comfort zone on the Philippe Chatrier court where he has only lost once, a fourth round exit to Robin Soderling in 2009.

"It's a very wide and very big court. He likes to have that visual effect, as well, because it appears that he gets every ball back," said Djokovic.

"He feels more comfortable when he plays on the bigger court. That's one of the reasons why he's so successful here."

"But we played some really close and good matches, good quality matches the last two years here, especially the one last year serving at 4-3 in the fifth set to go 5-3. It was a very close one."

"And knowing that I was that close to win against him the past two years gives me that reason to believe that I can make it this time. He's not unbeatable."

The rivalry between the two men stretches back to 2006. Their first meeting was in the quarterfinals at the French Open when Djokovic retired with back trouble.

Since then they have fought out a series of classic battles, most notably the 2012 Australian Open final which lasted almost six hours.

That match won by Djokovic was played under the Melbourne floodlights whereas Sunday's final is expected to be greeted by bright sunshine and temperatures pushing towards the 30-degree mark.

No wonder Nadal was all smiles.

"For me it is much better when the weather is like today. My ball creates more topspin. The ball goes quicker in the air, and with my forehand I am able to create more with less," said Nadal who has a career 13-4 winning record on clay over Djokovic.

GERMANY 2006

The Berlin Wall



PHOTO: DAILY STAR ARCHIVE

Fabio Cannavaro was the embodiment of a complete centre-back.

February 1997. Injuries elsewhere had pushed the then-23-year-old into the starting XI for his competitive international debut.

It could not have been a potentially tougher baptism of fire. A young Cannavaro was thrown into the deep end in one of the most intense pressure-cooker arenas. The Neapolitan came out as the man-of-the-match, and Italy recorded an impressive 1-0 victory thanks to Gianfranco Zola's near-post strike.

Cannavaro was an indispens-

able player for Italy for the next 13 years, and captain after Maldini's retirement in 2002. He forged one of football's best-ever centre-back partnerships with Alessandro Nesta -- the pair had a telepathic understanding of one another and were seconds away from European Championship glory in 2000 until France's Sylvain Wiltord equalised four minutes into injury time -- forcing extra-time where Les Bleus triumphed via David Trezeguet's Golden Goal.

The backs-to-the-wall semifinal