

Murray returns from the brink

Nadal, Djokovic breeze through

AFP, Paris
 World number two Andy Murray avoided a huge first-round upset at the French Open on Tuesday, but Australian Open champion Angelique Kerber crashed out after losing to Kiki Bertens. Murray, a three-time Roland Garros semi-finalist, recovered from a two-set deficit to overcome 37-year-old Radek Stepanek 3-6, 3-6, 6-0, 6-3, 7-5 on Court Philippe Chatrier. The second seed had been trailing by two sets to one but up a break in the fourth when play was suspended on Monday due to darkness. The Scot duly returned to complete the job after making the crucial breakthrough at 5-all in the decider to set up a second-round encounter with 164th-ranked French wildcard Mathias Bourgue. "He's always been extremely difficult to play," said Murray after a ninth career comeback from two sets down. "He was playing drop shots, hitting the ball very flat, it was very difficult to get into a rhythm. That's credit to him and the way he played." While Murray toiled, there were no

such problems for nine-time champion Rafael Nadal who extended his record at Roland Garros to 71 wins against just two losses. The fourth-seeded Spaniard made quick work of 100th-ranked Sam Groth, taming the Australian's powerful serve with eight breaks in a resounding 6-1, 6-1, 6-1 win. Novak Djokovic launched his bid with a 6-4, 6-1, 6-1 victory over Taiwan's world number one Lu Yen-Hsun. However, Kerber became the tournament's first major casualty as Dutchwoman Bertens consigned the German third seed to a 6-2, 3-6, 6-3 defeat. Fifth seed Victoria Azarenka was knocked out when she was forced to retire from her opening round tie with a knee injury. Former world number one and two-time Australian Open champion Azarenka went down 6-3, 6-7 (6/8), 4-0 to Italy's world number 118 Karin Knapp. Seventh seed Tomas Berdych cruised to a straight-sets win over Canada's Vasek Pospisil. Austria's Dominic Thiem struggled initially against Inigo Cervantes, but the 13th seed rallied to claim a 3-6, 6-2, 7-5, 6-1 victory.



World number two Andy Murray looked set for a defeat after dropping the first two sets against Radek Stepanek, but he battled hard to win the third set before play was called off due to darkness on Monday. Resuming yesterday, Murray clinched the next two sets to dispatch his opponent and advance.

Stars align for Mourinho

AFP, Manchester
 Jose Mourinho was on the verge of fulfilling his dream of managing Manchester United on Tuesday after Louis van Gaal's troubled two-year reign came to a bitter end. The path was clear for the former Chelsea manager to be confirmed as the new United boss after Van Gaal was sacked Monday -- the price of failing to get one of the world's biggest clubs into the Champions League. Mourinho's agent Jorge Mendes was reported by British media to be in negotiations to tie up a deal. It sets the stage for one of the sport's most intriguing characters to at last manage the Red Devils after a glittering career that so far features 21 major trophies, including three English Premier League crowns and two Champions League titles. Mourinho was sacked by Chelsea in December after a miserable campaign marred by rifts with the club's star players that eventually became intolerable to owner Roman Abramovich as the team languished near the relegation zone. Now the 53-year-old will hope to restore his reputation by bringing back the sparkle to United. A casually-dressed Mourinho declined to

MANCHESTER UNITED LEGENDS REACT

I love his [Mourinho's] personality. I love the passion he has for the game [and] his humour. He is very intelligent, he demands 100% of his players. And of course he wins things. But I don't think it's the type of football that the fans of Manchester United will love, even if they win. He can win, but do they expect that type of football, even if they win? I don't think so.

- Eric Cantona

He has to go back to the values of the football club -- a very strong team consisting of exciting players who are creating chances and scoring. Now they have a guy that is supposed to be the biggest manager in the world, the one that really could save Manchester United.

- Peter Schmeichel

There's no disputing Jose is one of the best managers in football. I love Jose. I think he's an incredible manager, a great person, and he's passionate. The English public love him.

- David Beckham

answer reporters' questions as he left his London home and got into a car on Tuesday morning. Mourinho seemed destined to manage United ever since his Porto side eliminated Ferguson's men from the 2004 Champions League. He thought his time had come when Ferguson retired in 2013, but concerns over his volatile nature prompted United to turn to the more reserved David Moyes instead. But with that move proving a disaster and Van Gaal faring little better, United's powerbrokers have decided to take a chance on Mourinho. Mourinho will hope to have significantly improved an unbalanced and lacklustre United squad by the time the new season begins in August. Outgoing Paris Saint-Germain forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Sporting Lisbon midfielder Joao Mario, Everton defender John Stones, Chelsea midfielder Nemanja Matic and Atletico Madrid forward Antoine Griezmann are reportedly among the names on his wanted list. But Mourinho might also have to deal with scepticism from the squad at Old Trafford after a report that some senior players have already expressed concern the tactically defensive coach might prove too similar to Van Gaal, whose dull tactics frustrated United fans.

L'pool, Man Utd fined 40k euros

AFP, London
 Liverpool and Manchester United have been fined by UEFA over a variety of charges, including illicit chanting, during their Europa League last-16 tie. The Premier League clubs were fined 40,000 euros each for the chants by their fans, with half the sum suspended for a probationary period of two years, European soccer's governing body said on its website on Tuesday. Liverpool were fined an additional 17,000 euros for other incidents, including supporters setting off fireworks and throwing objects. United received an additional 18,000 euro fine for crowd disturbances, including fans blocking stairways. Liverpool were ordered to contact United within 30 days for the settlement of damages caused by their supporters at Old Trafford. The Europa League games were marred by chants about the 1958 Munich air crash and the Hillsborough stadium disaster of 1989. Liverpool were beaten 3-1 by Sevilla in the Europa League final in Basel last week and both clubs were charged by UEFA for crowd disturbances, including fans setting off fireworks.

Player dies after on-field altercation

AGENCIES, Buenos Aires
 Michael Favre, a 24-year-old footballer from Argentina, has died after two blows to the head during a match. The terrible scenes unfolded as Favre turned out for Club San Jorge de Villa Elisa against Defensores de Colon in a provincial match. Favre fell while chasing a ball alongside opponent Geronimo Quintana, and Quintana caught him in the head with his knee. Favre reacted angrily, at which point a Defensores player ran in and appeared to hit Favre with his arm, sending him down again. Favre again regained his feet but was clearly struggling. He was taken to hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival.



PROTEGE TO SUCCESSOR: While Louis van Gaal (L) had Jose Mourinho (C) as a member of his staff during their time together at Barcelona, Jose has turned the tables as he looks set to replace his former boss at Old Trafford. PHOTO: FILE

LvG voices disappointment

AFP, Manchester
 Louis van Gaal's sacking as Manchester United manager was finally confirmed on Monday, as the Premier League club announced the Dutchman had left with immediate effect. Van Gaal had appeared certain to lose his job since reports leaked out after United's FA Cup final victory against Crystal Palace on Saturday that former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho was being lined up to replace him. The 64-year-old had hoped leading United to their first major silverware since the retirement of legendary boss Alex Ferguson in 2013 would persuade the club's United States-based owners,

the Glazer family, to let him see out the final season of his three-year contract. But United's failure to qualify for the lucrative Champions League proved fatal to van Gaal's chances of survival. Van Gaal felt he was hard done by after United suffered injuries to several key players and he couldn't hide his anguish at his premature exit. "I am very disappointed to be unable to complete our intended three year plan," van Gaal said in a statement released by United. "It has been an honour to manage such a magnificent club as Manchester United, and in doing so, I have fulfilled a long held ambition. "I believe that the foundations are firmly in place to enable the club to go

forward and achieve greater success." United's statement added "a decision on a successor as manager will be announced soon" as vice-chairman Ed Woodward praised van Gaal's efforts. "I would like to thank Louis and his staff for their excellent work in the past two years culminating in winning a record-equalling 12th FA Cup for the club (and securing him a title in four different countries)," Woodward said. "He behaved with great professionalism and dignity throughout his time. He leaves us with a legacy of having given several young players the confidence to show their ability on the highest stage. "Everyone at the club wishes him all the best in the future."

Mou offers Giggs role in staff

THE IRISH TIMES
 Ryan Giggs has been offered a role on Jose Mourinho's coaching staff when the Portuguese becomes the next Manchester United manager. However, he could decide to end a 25-year association with the club by refusing to accept the position and depart Old Trafford. While Mourinho is expected to be appointed, Giggs has been assured there is a future at United for him. The Welshman now has to decide if he wishes to continue at United or that now is the time to leave. Giggs was viewed as a potential successor to the Dutchman but now that he has been overlooked for Mourinho, Giggs may feel frustration and decide to depart a club he firsts represented as a player in 1991.

Zlatan bound for Man Utd?

AGENCIES
 Manchester United could make striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who is out of contract, their first signing of the Jose Mourinho era. The 34-year-old has spoken warmly of his experience of working with Mourinho in the past, and reports have emerged that he has been offered a one-year deal worth about 250,000 pounds per week. Zlatan has more lucrative offers from China, but he is still reportedly considering a move to United.

Ronaldo 'fit for final'

REUTERS, Madrid
 Cristiano Ronaldo has reassured Real Madrid fans he will be fit to play in Saturday's Champions League final against Atletico Madrid in Milan after limping out of Tuesday's training session. Ronaldo failed to complete training for the third session in a row, leaving the pitch with a thigh problem following a clash with Real goalkeeper Kiko Casilla. "It was a minor scare, a knock, but in a few days' time I will be well," the Portuguese forward told reporters. The 31-year-old missed the first leg of Real's semi-final against Manchester City with a thigh injury but thinks he is in better physical condition than he was before the final two years today. "I believe I'm in better shape," he said. "I've had a slight problem but it's normal as I have been the most used player in the team. "I think this is the season where I have played the most minutes. Besides the problem of today's training session, I

believe I'm at my best level." Real's goalscoring machine is just one victory away from clinching his third European crown. Ronaldo is one goal short of matching his own record of 17 in the competition set in the 2013-14 campaign when the team lifted the European Cup for the 10th time. "I would love to equal or even surpass that record," Ronaldo said. "But it is not an obsession. The record is mine whether I score or not in the final. The important thing is that we win." Ronaldo is the all-time leading scorer in Europe's elite club competition with 93 goals, 78 for Real. The former Manchester United player netted the last goal in the final in Lisbon two years ago when Real defeated Atletico 4-1 after extra-time. Ronaldo has amassed 51 goals in 47 games in all competitions this season but none against Atletico. "I'm focused," he said. "This is the game of our lives. "The best two teams are in the final. I believe we are better but we have to play a good game. I think we will win and lift the European Cup again on Saturday."



Real Madrid superstar Cristiano Ronaldo writhes in pain after a collision with Kiko Casilla during training yesterday. PHOTO: AFP