

'Don't cry, Coco'

AFP, Paris

Iga Swiatek cruised to her second French Open title by dominating teenager Coco Gauff in the final on Saturday, as the world number one claimed her 35th successive victory.

Swiatek celebrated her sixth straight title this year in the players' box with her friends and family.

"I told Coco 'Don't cry' and that's what I am doing. Congrats to Coco," said an emotional Swiatek.

"You are doing an amazing job. At your age, I was on my first year on tour and I did not know what I was doing. You will find it, I am sure of that."

A disconsolate Gauff was left sitting on her seat in tears after a nervous performance, punctuated by 23 unforced errors and three double faults.



Poland's Iga Swiatek wears a broad smile as she holds the French Open trophy after beating Coco Gauff of the USA in the final at the Court Philippe-Chatrier in Paris on Saturday. The Polish world number one cruised to her second French Open title, beating the American teenager 62, 6-3 in only 68 minutes, to claim her 35th successive victory.

PHOTO: AFP

'I'd prefer to lose the final'

AFP, Paris

Rafael Nadal will become the oldest man to win the French Open title if he defeats Casper Ruud, the Norwegian whose clay court talents he has personally helped foster.

Nadal will be playing in his 14th Roland Garros final on Sunday and 30th overall at the Grand Slams. Victory will deliver a record-extending 22nd major and 14th French Open, 17 years after his title winning debut in Paris.

The 36-year-old Nadal is, however, as surprised as anyone to have got this far.

A chronic left foot injury which has plagued him throughout his career flared up again in Rome last month, putting a serious question mark over even making it to the French capital.

"Without a doubt, I'd prefer to lose the final and have a new foot," admitted Nadal who has not hidden the brutal reality that every match he plays at Roland Garros may be his last.

Despite his fears, Nadal has impressively battled his way into Sunday's championship match. His record at the French Open now stands at 111 wins and just three losses. Djokovic was responsible for two of those defeats.

Nadal was only 19 when he won his first French Open in 2005. Victory on Sunday will make him the tournament's oldest champion, eclipsing 34-year-old compatriot Andres Gimeno who took the title 50 years ago.

World number eight Ruud, 23, is the tour's in-form clay court player. Ruud is the first Norwegian to reach a Grand Slam final.

Ruud has been training at Nadal's academy in Manacor since 2018 alongside his father Christian, a former top 40 player, and Spaniard Pedro Clar.

Ruud was just six years old when Nadal was first crowned French Open champion and describes the Spaniard as his "idol".

"I could probably tell you all the finals and who he has played and who he has beaten, because I watched them all on TV," said the Norwegian.

"He's the greatest clay court player of all time and one of the greatest all-around players."



Saifuddin relishes return

Mohammad Saifuddin had been rated as one of the few genuine seaming all-rounders that Bangladesh desperately need, especially in the limited over formats. Following a complex back injury, the 25-year-old has completed his recovery and is all set to make a comeback during the 'Tigers' upcoming white-ball series in the West Indies. The cricketer from Feni spoke to The Daily Star's Mazhar Uddin ahead of the West Indies tour and shared his plans along with a few other topics during an exclusive interview, the excerpts of which are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): The wait must have been agonising since injury at the T20 World Cup last year pushed you into the sidelines?

Mohammad Saifuddin (MS): Obviously it was not easy for me since I was unable to play the BPL [Bangladesh Premier League] and also missed a few series due to injury. As you know, our pace unit is doing really well and since I'm making a comeback to the team, it won't be easy for me to get my place back. I'll have to work extremely hard. However, I'm taking this as a challenge and as I'd be playing in the white-ball format, I am optimistic about giving my best out there.

DS: How was rehabilitation during this time? And how difficult is it for a

cricketer to stay out of cricket and watch their teammates play for the country?

MS: To be honest, yes, it's very difficult even if you don't play well but as soon as you manage to bounce back on the field, you tend to forget what happened in the previous games.

You see, when a recurring injury forces you out of cricket for a long time, it's really frustrating. Coming back after five-six months is mentally stressful because being a cricketer we always want to go out there in the field and represent the nation.

DS: You travelled to the United Kingdom for treatment. What is your current back-pain situation?

MS: I went to the UK with Dr. Debashish Chowdhury bhai and underwent a few scans. Fortunately, nothing major was detected and no treatment was required. My back is well and for me it's important to continue the strength-training and gym-work to remain physically fit and strong. Obviously I'll also have to work more on my skills and develop gradually. Look, pace bowlers' life is all about how you can manage injuries and play for

an extended period and I'm focusing on that aspect.

DS: What will be your biggest challenge in the West Indies since this will be your first tour there?

MS: Honestly, I haven't planned anything yet but I've been following the games played in the West Indies. I watched the games on YouTube and tried to gain some idea about the pitches and conditions there. I think there will be a bit more bounce but otherwise I think it'll remain similar to Bangladesh. As a fast bowler, obviously, it'll be important for me to focus on the dot balls in T20 format while in ODIs you need to be more aggressive while bowling with both the new and old ball.



Denmark's Andreas Cornelius celebrates with teammates following a 2-1 win over world champions France in their UEFA Nations League fixture at the Stade de France on Friday. The 29-year-old Trabzonspor striker scored both goals for Denmark, with Karim Benzema reducing the arrears for the hosts.

PHOTO: AFP

Ukraine aim to complete World Cup dream in Wales

AFP, Cardiff

Ukraine's footballers made a war-torn nation proud by beating Scotland in their first competitive clash since Russia's invasion, but the job of getting to the World Cup is only half done ahead of Sunday's play-off final against Wales.

A place in Qatar later this year is the prize for the winners at the Cardiff City Stadium, where history also beckons for the home side.

Wales have not reached a World Cup since 1958 and manager Rob Page has described the Ukraine clash as "the biggest match in Welsh history".

The same could be said for different reasons for Ukraine as they aim to provide some solace and national pride to a country devastated by Russian aggression.

"We played for those who fight in trenches, who fight with their last drop of blood. We played for Ukrainians who suffer every day," said Ukraine coach Oleksandr Petrakov after his side outclassed Scotland to win 3-1 in Glasgow on Wednesday.

"We still have the Wales game in front of us. We will do everything to make Ukrainians proud."

Petrakov admitted to being emotionally "empty" in the aftermath of victory at Hampden Park.

However, the 64-year-old, who tried to sign up to Ukraine's territorial defence when war broke out, and his players must summon another huge effort to deliver their World Cup dream.

Six of the starting line-up against Scotland are still contracted

to Ukrainian clubs and had not played a competitive game this year.

As Artem Dovbyk broke clear to score the visitors' third goal with the final kick of the game, his teammates sank to their knees in exhaustion rather than joining in the celebrations.

"We all understand that the game with Wales will no longer be about physical condition or tactics, it will be a game of survival," said Oleksandr Zinchenko.

"Everyone will fight to the end and give their all, because we will play for our country."

Wales beat Austria in their play-off semifinal three months ago thanks to Gareth Bale's brilliant double and were able to name a second-string side for their 2-1 Nations League defeat by Poland on Wednesday.

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