

ZVEREV SEEKING STRONG START IN BID FOR ATP HAT TRICK

CINCINNATI: He's the hottest man in tennis after winning trophies at Montreal and Washington this month, but Alexander Zverev would like to escape his opening round without a scare for once.

The 20-year-old German, a career-best seventh in this week's ATP rankings, could complete a hat trick of titles this week at Cincinnati in the last major tuneup for the US Open, which starts August 28 in New York.

But his first matches have been nail-biters in both championship runs, Australia's Jordan Thompson falling 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/5) at Washington and France's Richard Gasquet squandering three match points in losing 6-3, 4-6 7-6 (7/3) at Montreal.

"I won both first rounds in Montreal

and Washington 7-6 in the third and then after that I haven't lost a set in the whole tournament," Zverev said Tuesday. "I think winning those kinds of matches helps as well. That gives you a lot of confidence for the next few rounds."

Zverev has captured five titles this year, taking Montpellier and Rome after being pushed to three sets in openers and Munich after dropping the first set but winning two tie-breakers in his second match against countryman Jan-Lennard Struff. "I feel well on the court," Zverev said. "I feel very confident."

Zverev, who had a first-round bye, opens Wednesday against 19-year-old American Frances Tiafoe, a second-round loser in straight sets to Zverev this year at Wimbledon and the

Australian Open in their only career ATP meetings.

Due to injuries and withdrawals, the only player ranked above Zverev in the field is Spain's Rafael Nadal, who takes over the world number one spot next week from Britain's Andy Murray, out with a hip injury.

Coming off his best Grand Slam run into the fourth round at Wimbledon, Zverev looks ready to make a deep run on the US Open hardcourts.

"I don't put pressure on myself, but obviously I want to do well there," he said. "I know I'm in a position to do so. I just won back-to-back weeks with one Masters event in it so I know I can maybe have a good US Open." Zverev says better conditioning is the secret behind his rise in the past year.

"Physically I improved a lot. My serve improved and my returns improved. But all small things," he said. "In general, my game has become quicker and faster, but that's a lot to do with the physical part."

ZVEREV PAIRS WITH PAES

Zverev paired Tuesday with 44-year-old Indian doubles legend Leander Paes and lost to Spain's Feliciano and Marc Lopez 2-6, 7-6 (7/2), 10-6, in a jam-packed outer stadium match.

"He needs someone very high ranked to get in those tournaments. He asked me if I can help him out, I'm like, yeah, sure," Zverev said. "I know him quite well. He's a good guy. Unfortunately we lost, but it was fun." Zverev said his doubles appearances

will be "not very often."

What he will do often is play Brazil's Marcelo Melo in FIFA '17 video games during lulls. "I think winning in FIFA in the evenings is way important for me, just because mentally that helps me way more than winning Masters. Who cares about that, really?" Zverev said with a smile to a question from Melo.

Zverev claims to overcome huge edges for Melo in team selection, he taking underdogs while the South American grabs the likes of Barcelona, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich or Manchester United.

"We play completely random," Zverev said. "Most of the time he gets something like a five-star team and I get an Arabic team which has one star. And I still beat him." — AFP

EXPECTANT SERENA AIMS FOR AUSTRALIAN OPEN COMEBACK

LOS ANGELES: Serena Williams, feeling "new power" from her pregnancy, is already preparing for an Australian Open title defense in January.

In a wide-ranging interview with Vogue touching on motherhood, body image and race, Williams said she had set herself a goal of playing Melbourne.

"It's the most outrageous plan," the 36-year-old Williams, who is expecting her first child next month. "I just want to put that out there. That's, like, three months after I give birth. I'm not walking anything back, but I'm just saying it's pretty intense."

Williams said during her pregnancy lay-off she had kept a close eye on the tennis world, including her sister Venus's run to the Wimbledon final. And she has her eye on matching Margaret Court's all-time record of 24 Grand Slam titles. She was already pregnant when she won her 23rd at the Australian Open last January.

"Obviously, if I have a chance to go out there and catch up with Margaret, I am not going to pass that up," Williams said. "If any-

thing, this pregnancy has given me a new power." Williams says she's had a "love-hate relationship with the idea of power" as it relates to her game, sometimes irked that her skill and strategy seemed to be overlooked. "As I've gotten older I've started to feel differently about it. Power is beauty. Strength is beauty. So now on the court I want people to think that I'm powerful," she said. But she's dismayed to think that many interpret her on-court determination as "mean" — something she believes has to do with race.

"I feel like people think I'm mean," she says. "Really tough and really mean and really stee. I believe that the other girls in the locker room will say, 'Serena's really nice.' But Maria Sharapova, who might not talk to anybody, might be perceived by the public as nicer. Why is that? Because I'm black and so I look mean? That's the society we live in. That's life. They say African-Americans have to be twice as good, especially women. I'm perfectly OK with having to be twice as good." — AFP



WASHINGTON: File photo shows Alexander Zverev, of Germany, returns the ball during the finals of the Citi Open tennis tournament against Kevin Anderson, of South Africa, in Washington. — AP

TENNIS

ISNER LEAPS INTO ZVEREV'S PATH AT INJURY-HIT CINCINNATI

CINCINNATI: In a week where most ATP stars are idled by injuries, the two men with multiple titles since Wimbledon — John Isner and Alexander Zverev — are on a collision course.

Isner fired 16 aces and needed only 56 minutes Tuesday to dispatch fellow American Tommy Paul 6-3, 6-3 and reach the third round at the ATP and WTA Cincinnati Open. "I played a good match and I'm happy to get off the court in under an hour," Isner said. "When I had break point, I got after it, put good returns on the court and played aggressively." World number 19 Isner, who won titles last month at Newport and Atlanta, could next face Zverev, who has taken titles the past two weeks at Montreal and Washington, although the 20-year-old German must get past US teen Frances Tiafoe yesterday. "If I do play him, it will be a huge challenge. For me, he's definitely the guy to beat right now on tour," Isner said. "If I do play him, I'll be very much looking forward to that and definitely think I can give him a good tussle."

Spanish top seed Rafael Nadal, the 15-time Grand Slam champion who returns to world number one next week after a three-year absence, faces France's Richard Gasquet in his opener Wednesday after a bye. World number 10 Milos Raonic of Canada withdrew Tuesday with a left wrist injury, leaving only three of the top 10 in the men's field.

Also among the missing are Roger Federer (back), British world number one Andy Murray (hip), Novak Djokovic (elbow), Stan Wawrinka (knee), Kei Nishikori (right wrist) and Marin Cilic (adductor). That offers an enticing chance for those who have never won so large a title, even with Zverev and Nadal still in. "It's an opportunity for a lot of players," Isner said. "I think (Zverev) recognizes that as well. I think he has looked at the draw and seen that Roger is out and Milos is out. 'So I think his eyes are kind of popped wide open again. He's looking for another one.'"

MUGURUZA ADVANCES

On the women's side, Wimbledon winner Garbine Muguruza and second-ranked Simona Halep cruised into the third round. Romania's Halep, hoping to overtake Czech Karolina Pliskova for the world number one ranking this week, downed US qualifier Taylor Townsend 6-4, 6-1, while Spain's sixth-ranked Muguruza ousted Brazil's Beatriz Haddad Maia 6-2, 6-0.

"I'm happy to be into the third round," Muguruza said. After trading four service breaks in the first six games, Halep took 11 of the last 12 to dispatch Townsend in 66 minutes.

US ninth seed Venus Williams downed compatriot Alison Riske 6-2, 6-0 to book a second-round match with Australian qualifier Ashleigh Barty. French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko of Latvia was ousted by Serbian qualifier Aleksandra Krunic 6-4, 6-2 while Russian lucky loser Natalia Vikhlyantseva beat Croatia's Donna Vekic 6-3, 2-6, 6-3 to book a matchup with Czech women's world number one Karolina Pliskova.

Argentina's Juan Martin del Potro, the 2009 US Open champion, hit 17 aces in defeating Czech 10th seed Tomas Berdych 3-6, 7-6 (7/1), 6-0 while Japan's Yuichi Sugita took advantage of 43 unforced errors by Jack Sock to out the US 13th seed 7-5, 6-4. Those results left Bulgaria's 11th-ranked Grigor Dimitrov as the only seed in his quarter of the draw. — AFP

'AUNT' VENUS PREPARING FOR SERENA'S BABY AND US OPEN

CINCINNATI: Wimbledon and Australian Open runner-up Venus Williams is preparing this week for the US Open and to become a new aunt with sister Serena giving birth to a baby soon.

Ninth-ranked Venus advanced Tuesday to the second round at the WTA Cincinnati Open by eliminating US compatriot Alison Riske 6-2, 6-0 in 66 minutes.

But off the court, she's doing some online shopping for Serena's baby, and getting some valuable advice from her mother, Oracene Price, who has raised five daughters. "I have a lot of things in my cart that I'm about to order," Venus Williams said. "I talked to my mom yesterday. I'm like, 'Mom, what do you really, really need?' So she really gave me the low-down." "So I'm going to get this stuff and as things progress I'll see what I need after." Serena and her fiancée, Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian, have said they plan to keep the sex of the baby a surprise until birth.

Serena, 35, was pregnant when she beat Venus, 37, in an Australian Open final that was more all-Williams than either knew, winning a 23rd career Grand Slam singles crown, one shy of Margaret Court's all-time record. In April, Serena revealed on social media that she was pregnant. She is expected to give birth in about another month. With Serena sidelined, seven-time

Grand Slam winner Venus has picked up the family mantle and turned back the clock, making a run to the Wimbledon final last month, losing to Spain's Garbine Muguruza in a bid for her first Slam crown since 2008.

Venus, who won five Wimbledon and two US Open titles, has been an aunt before, but not when she was old enough to do some serious spoiling and spending on the new arrival.

"This is the first time I've been an aunt as an adult," she said. "So it's a completely different experience than before when I was a child." After a third-round exit in Toronto last week, Williams hopes to put the final fine tuning on her game this week ahead of the year's final Grand Slam that begins August 28 in New York.

"I just want to play free and feel confident. That's important," Williams said. "I need to play my best at all the big events."

"Today was about being measured and being patient and trying to just capitalize on the match."

Williams, who won her 49th career WTA singles crown last year at Kaohsiung, said she doesn't feel pressure to win the title this week. "Not really, but I want to (feel that pressure)," she said. "I want to win every match. The aim is to get out there and be better every single time." — AFP



Venus Williams

KASPAROV SUFFERS FIRST LOSS IN COMEBACK EVENT

ST LOUIS: Chess legend Garry Kasparov on Tuesday suffered the first loss of his brief but highly anticipated comeback to the game, succumbing to fellow Russian Ian Nepomniachtchi and bringing his draw total to five. After three draws on Monday, the 54-year-old former world champion — who dominated the game from 1985 to 2000 — had hoped to play "more aggressive" chess on day two of the Rapid and Blitz tournament in St Louis. But after drawing his first game Tuesday with Armenian world number four Levon Aronian, a contest that featured some gutsy moves from Kasparov and a few trademark death stares, he could not hold on against Nepomniachtchi.

At the day's close Kasparov drew once more after going up against Viswanathan Anand of India, another "former" competitor and the only one present to have played against Kasparov when he ran the global chessboard.

"I haven't played serious chess in 12 years, & haven't missed as many opportunities as I did today in 15! Hoping to steady the ship tomorrow!" tweeted Kasparov at the end of the day. "I was too democratic today. I made quite a few good moves, but spread them evenly among all three games instead of con-

centrating them!" After his loss Kasparov's fans, all hoping to see the brilliance that characterized his long career, said they were disappointed but still hopeful. "It had to happen. But he is doing pretty well for a comeback against these new players," said one fan, 42-year-old American Tracy Stewart. "He hasn't been offensive enough." Kasparov, who left the game in order to pursue a career in politics, will need some wins if he wants to move up in the tournament rankings — he started Tuesday in 7th position out of 10.

Victories would give his comeback some symbolic power — Kasparov would be seen as passing the torch to a new generation, albeit a generation still spellbound by his talent.

But those more youthful players seem determined to knock Kasparov from his pedestal. On Tuesday neither his risks nor his intimidating glowering looks paid off.

American grandmaster Robert Hess had predicted a "tough day," saying that "every opponent is extremely strong, so Garry will certainly need to bring his A game if he is going to try to score some victories."

Though the winner's purse in St Louis is a not-too-shabby \$150,000, Kasparov said he would donate any winnings to promote chess in Africa. — AFP



ST LOUIS: Grandmaster chess player Garry Kasparov contemplates his move during a match against fellow grandmaster Levon Aronian on day two of the Grand Chess Tour at the Chess Club and Scholastic Center in St Louis on Tuesday. Kasparov and other chess grandmasters are in St. Louis to compete in the Grand Chess Tour. Kasparov was World Champion for decades. — AFP