

PAIRE UPSETS NISHIKORI

TOKYO: Unseeded Frenchman Benoit Paire will take on Stan Wawrinka in the Japan Open final after storming back from a set down to upset home favorite Kei Nishikori in the semi-finals yesterday.

Paire, competing in his first ATP Tour 500 semi-final, looked out of sorts in the opening set but found his range following a medical timeout in the second to re-tape his ankle.

The bearded 26-year-old Frenchman grew in confidence with some strong returns and big serves to secure a 1-6 6-4 6-2 win over the double defending champion, who became more tentative as the match wore on. Paire won his first ATP Tour title on the clay at Bastad in July and will go in search of his second against French

Open champion Wawrinka, who served strongly in taking out Gilles Muller of Luxembourg. The Swiss top seed coming through 6-4 7-6(5) to reach his fourth final of the year.

The opening set went with serve before Wawrinka broke in the seventh game and went on to close it out, dropping just four points on serve in the set.

Muller, who will break back in to the top 40 after his strong run in Japan, found a way to pressure Wawrinka in the second set by rushing the Swiss and breaking serve but failed to capitalise as he lost his own. The set went to a tiebreak with Muller putting a backhand volley wide to hand Wawrinka the win on his first match point.—Reuters

DJOKOVIC DESTROYS FERRER TO SET UP NADAL FINAL CLASH

BEIJING: Novak Djokovic brushed off David Ferrer 6-2, 6-3 yesterday to reach the China Open final, where old rival Rafael Nadal stands between the Serb and a sixth title in Beijing.

Top-ranked Djokovic suffered the inconvenience of having his service broken for the first time at this year's tournament but he still raced to his 28th win at an event where he is yet to be beaten.

In the women's semis, established names fell to rising stars as Garbine Muguruza beat Agnieszka Radwanska 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 and Timea Bacsinszky knocked out Ana Ivanovic 5-7, 6-4, 6-1. And on a cold day in Beijing, Nadal stared down his nemesis Fabio Fognini 7-5, 6-3 to reach his first hardcourt final this year as he searches to recover the form which brought him 14 Grand Slam titles.

Eighth-ranked Nadal, stopped at his beloved French Open by Djokovic this year, self-effacingly said the world number one was now a class apart despite his winning record of 23-21 in their head-to-head.

"I know today Novak is not in my league, it's a different level from me this year," Nadal said. "So for me to be in the final is a great news and tomorrow is a match to try to enjoy and try to play the way that I want to play, and we'll see." But Djokovic, who is now into his 12th straight final this year, dismissed Nadal's assessment and said he was expecting a high-quality title match today.

"I always expect a battle with (Nadal)," he said. "I always prepare myself for the battle, no question about it. He's the player I played the most against in my life. There are no secrets."

Ten-time major-winner Djokovic had been irresistible in his run to the semi-finals, dropping only nine games thus far and he soon had Ferrer gasping with two breaks of serve to go 4-1 ahead in the first set.

Ferrer, who won his 25th career title last

week in Kuala Lumpur, conjured a break of his own but the stung Djokovic broke straight back and finished the set impressively in the next game.

Two more breaks in the second set put Djokovic on his way and despite a mini-implosion, when he double-faulted twice and was broken as he served for the match, a sixth break of the Ferrer serve earned him victory.

Nadal's path to the final was much less smooth but he grittily outpunched Fognini, who has beaten him three times this season and with whom he had a furious on-court row in the Hamburg final in August.

Nadal denied an extra edge to the match in Beijing, but his lukewarm handshake at the net and apparent exchanges between his coach and uncle, Toni Nadal, and Fognini told a different story.

Nadal won the bad-tempered Hamburg final but Fognini stunned the Spaniard in last month's US Open third round, becoming only the fourth player to beat him three times in the same season.

"No rivalry at all. No, no, no. I don't know what's going on, seriously," Nadal insisted. "We had the issue that we had in Hamburg, and that's it. No problems."

Fognini also said the Hamburg row was in the past but he indicated ill-feeling may remain against Nadal's team and in particular his coach and uncle, Toni, who was seen angrily gesticulating courtside. "What happened in Hamburg is past, for sure. But I have nothing to say (to Nadal). I have all respect with him outside and inside the court," said the Italian.

"I was telling another time, the history (argument) was not against him, but against his team, especially the uncle. But is something that is really far away. "If I have to do something, I do it in the moment. If I do it wrong, I say, 'Sorry'. If I'm right, I'm right, and that's it."—AFP



SOCHI: Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton of Britain steers his car during the second free practice session at the 'Sochi Autodrom' Formula One track.—AP

ROSBERG AGAIN DENIES HAMILTON HIS 50TH POLE

SOCHI: Nico Rosberg seized pole position for the Russian Formula One Grand Prix yesterday with world champion Lewis Hamilton joining his team mate on the front row in a perfect qualifying for Mercedes. The pole was Rosberg's third of the season with championship leader Hamilton, who is 48 points clear of the German with five races remaining, denied his 50th for the third race in succession.

Hamilton, who had hoped for his 12th pole in 15 races, aborted his second and final lap of the final phase after making a mistake on a clear afternoon in the Olympic Park.

The front row lockout was still just what Mercedes had ordered, with the team needing to score three points more than Ferrari to clinch their second successive constructors' title this weekend. Finland's Valtteri Bottas qualified third for Mercedes-powered Williams with Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel and Kimi Raikkonen fourth and fifth. Hamilton won last year's inaugural race in Russia from pole, with Rosberg runner-up after also starting on the front row,

but he could not get close to Rosberg's time of one minute 37.113 seconds.

"We didn't get much practice but qualifying worked out really well and a good balance on the car," said the German after his second pole in a row. "We had to guess a little bit...it all worked out well, I felt comfortable."

"Of course the constructors' championship is a really important target for us this weekend, it would be amazing to clinch it for a second time so early on in the season, and so we are out to do that. "At the same time of course I'm out here to reduce the gap to Lewis in terms of points."

Yesterday's final practice was halted after just 35 minutes when Toro Rosso's Spaniard Carlos Sainz, who remained in hospital during qualifying and is doubtful for the race despite escaping serious injury, crashed heavily.

Friday's two sessions, on a track that skirts around the 2014 Winter Olympic venues, were also limited due to a diesel spillage in the morning and rain through the afternoon.

"A difficult weekend I think for everyone but I think I did a great job with this lap," said Hamilton. "I'm perfectly happy with the balance that I had."

"I think it's great for the team. As you saw last year, this is actually not such a bad race from P2 (second on the grid)."

Rosberg got alongside Hamilton at the start last year but made a mistake that sent him back to 20th place. The German then did 52 laps on one set of tyres and fought back to finish second. Bottas set the fastest lap in that race and said it was good to be right behind the Mercedes pair, even if Brazilian team mate Felipe Massa qualified only 15th. Behind the Ferraris, Force India's Nico Hulkenberg and Sergio Perez qualified sixth and seventh with Romain Grosjean eighth for Lotus and Sainz's team mate Max Verstappen ninth. There was disappointment for Russian fans with the only home-grown driver, Red Bull's Daniil Kvyat, set to start in 11th place with Australian team mate Daniel Ricciardo 10th.—Reuters



BEIJING: Novak Djokovic of Serbia hits a return shot while playing against David Ferrer of Spain during their men's singles semifinal match in the China Open tennis tournament.—AP

ROOT BRACED FOR SPIN AND SUN

ABU DHABI: England batsman Joe Root insisted yesterday that his side can cope with the twin challenge of Pakistan spin and the searing heat of the Gulf in their three-Test series.

As underdogs, England regained the Ashes at home two months ago but now face a daunting threat from Pakistan who wrapped up a 3-0 series win on the last occasion the two teams met in the Middle East. "As a team, to beat Pakistan here it's going to be a big effort but we've proven over the last six months that we're capable of doing things that maybe looked a bit too much for us," said Root ahead of the first Test which starts Tuesday in Abu Dhabi.

"We're very confident going into this series and looking for some really good results." When England last played Pakistan in the Gulf, off-spinner Saeed Ajmal took 24 wickets and left-arm Abdul Rehman finished with 19.

This time around Pakistan will attack through in-form leg-spinner Yasir Shah and left-arm Zulfikar Babar, a challenge Root said England are preparing to counter.

"The volume of spin we might face, we might also face more left-arm seam than we're

used to so you make sure you cover all those bases at practice," said Root. Pakistan also have three left-arm seamers in Wahab Riaz, Rahat Ali and Junaid Khan in the squad of 16. Root admitted the heat, with temperatures in the high 30s, could have an effect.

"Again the heat and not expecting to score at the rate we'd like to or have become accustomed to over the last six months, they are all little factors," said Root, who hoped to carry his batting form, which earned him the player of the Ashes award, into the contest.

"I want to make some big contributions in this series and I am going to have to play extremely well to do that." Root hopes tours of South Asia with England Lions have put him in good stead to face the spinners. "I was lucky enough to spend a few Lions tours out in India and then out in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka which helped develop my game," he said. "But it's more volume of facing a lot of spin and finding different ways to cope and finding what works for me personally." The remaining Tests will be played in Dubai (October 22-26) and Sharjah (November 1-5) followed by four one-day and three Twenty20 internationals.—AFP

PRESSURE ON DHONI AS SA GEAR FOR INDIA ODIs

KANPUR: South Africa hope to build on their Twenty20 success in India by winning the one-day series starting today as rival skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni prepared to douse the fire around him.

The Proteas made a solid start to their 10-week Indian tour by winning both the first two T20 internationals before Thursday's final match at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata was washed out.

With four Tests looming in the last leg of the arduous tour, South Africa will be seeking to continue the momentum in the one-day series which opens at the Green Park in Kanpur. The tourists will have a new captain for the five internationals, with AB de Villiers taking over from T20 skipper Faf du Plessis. De Villiers will then make way for Hashim Amla in the Tests.

South Africa will be strengthened by the return of pace spearheads Dale Steyn and Morne Morkel, who were rested for the T20s to keep them fresh for the sterner tests ahead. However, Proteas coach Russell Domingo was not looking too far ahead, saying his team will not take victory for granted despite the T20 success.

"India are pretty good in all three formats so we are very pleased with the results so far," Domingo said of the team that defeated his boys in the World Cup earlier this year.

"But we have only played two days of cricket on the tour and there are 25 days of cricket still left. We have to focus all our energy on Kanpur." India's Dhoni, meanwhile, needs to bounce back in the one-dayers to silence critics after the T20 loss which followed a stunning 2-1 one-day defeat at the hands of Bangladesh in June.

Under Dhoni, India have won the 50-over World Cup, the World Twenty20 and the Champions Trophy, but his poor batting form of late has been slammed by the unforgiving local media.

"Is finisher Dhoni getting closer to finish line?" screamed a headline in the Times of India recently. "Time seems to be running out for the man once considered indispensable in limited-overs formats," the paper wrote.

With young Test captain Virat Kohli waiting in the wings, Dhoni may not be guaranteed the leadership role in the World T20 which India hosts next year if the one-day series too is lost. Team director Ravi Shastri said the

endeavour was to get Dhoni back to his best batting form, adding he was confident India will perform better in the upcoming series. "We know what he can do when he starts striking," Shastri said of the captain. "The world knows. I don't have to say anything."

"In one-dayers, we understand our game better. We are a much better side in one-dayers and Tests than in T20s and I expect a very, very good contest." The Kanpur match will be played during the day, while the remaining four games in Indore (October 14), Rajkot (Oct 18), Chennai (Oct 22) and Mumbai (Oct 25) will be day-night affairs.

India (from) - Mahendra Singh Dhoni (capt), Ravichandran Ashwin, Stuart Binny, Shikhar Dhawan, Virat Kohli, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Axar Patel, Ajinkya Rahane, Suresh Raina, Ambati Rayudu, Mohit Sharma, Rohit Sharma, Umesh Yadav, Gurkeerat Singh, Amit Mishra.

South Africa (from) - AB de Villiers (capt), Kyle Abbott, Hashim Amla, Farhaan Behardien, Quinton de Kock, JP Duminy, Faf du Plessis, Imran Tahir, David Miller, Morne Morkel, Chris Morris, Aaron Phangiso, Kagiso Rabada, Khaya Zondo, Dale Steyn.—AFP



KANPUR: Indian cricket captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni bats during a practice session in Kanpur, yesterday. India will play South Africa in the first of their five one-day match series today.—AP