

Sports

Thiem topples 'legend' Federer to win Indian Wells championship

Andreescu soars after Indian Wells breakthrough

INDIANA WELLS: Dominic Thiem claimed his first Masters 1000 title after coming from a set down to defeat Roger Federer 3-6 6-3 7-5 and win the BNP Paribas Open on Sunday in Indian Wells. Momentum swung in Thiem's favour in the deciding set when he smacked a forehand winner down the line to break Federer and take a 6-5 lead.

The Austrian fell on his back and covered his face with his hands when Federer, who had been bidding for a record sixth Indian Wells title and 101st tournament victory, netted on match point. The 25-year-old Thiem, who rose four places to a career-high world number four yesterday, paid tribute to his opponent.

"It is such a pleasure to compete with you, to learn so much from you, and to play with one of the biggest legends of all time," he told the 20-times Grand Slam champion during the trophy presentation ceremony.

"I feel like it's not my right to congratulate you, you have 88 more titles than me, so I'm just hoping you play more and we can have some other big finals," he said with a laugh. Federer was gracious in defeat after falling in the final in the Southern California desert for a second consecutive year.

"It has been a great week for me even though it didn't work out today," he said. "What a great week for Dominic. Wonderful playing at the very end and throughout the week. You deserve it." Federer raced to an early lead, winning the first three games before wrapping up the first set in the Southern California desert.

But baseline specialist Thiem kept his composure and levelled the match in the



INDIANA WELLS, CA: Dominic Thiem of Austria holds the championship trophy after his men's singles final victory against Roger Federer of Switzerland on day fourteen of the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden on March 17, 2019 in Indian Wells, California. — AFP

second, gaining traction by extending rallies and unleashing a torrent of high-kicking serves to keep Federer off balance. Federer's own serve lost some of its bite in the crucial game in the third set with the score tied at 5-5.

"The game he broke me I didn't serve very well, so I think he took advantage of that fact," said Federer, who was not overly down about the defeat. "I just got my 100 (career title) in Dubai and I had a good

week here," the 37-year-old said.

"Really there is no reason to get down. Plus there is more to look forward to in Miami." Thiem will also play in Miami, hoping to complete the "Sunshine Double" with a victory there after his Indian Wells win.

Earlier, Canadian teenager Bianca Andreescu rocketed up 36 places to a new best of 24th in the WTA rankings a day after her historic triumph at Indian Wells. The 18-year-old Andreescu beat Germany's



INDIANA WELLS: Bianca Andreescu of Canada poses with the winner's trophy after defeating Angelique Kerber of Germany in the women's singles final on Day 14 of the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden on Sunday in Indian Wells, California. — AFP

Angelique Kerber in Sunday's final to become the first women's wildcard to win the Indian Wells title.

Andreescu, with just one Grand Slam main draw victory to date, continued her meteoric rise having been ranked 243rd as recently as last October. Wimbledon champion Kerber moved up four places to fourth as Naomi Osaka stayed top of the pile despite crashing out in the last 16 in a failed title defence.

Simona Halep, who also lost in the fourth round, slipped from second to third as the Romanian was replaced by Petra Kvitova. Belinda Bencic continued her resurgence as she broke back into the top 20 after reaching the Indian Wells semi-finals, a run that included a victory over Osaka.

The 21-year-old Swiss won her first title in four years at Dubai last month after a string of injuries and a slump in form threatened to derail her career. — Agencies

Asian Clubs handball tourney begins tomorrow

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Director of Asian Handball Clubs Tournament Nawaf Al-Jarayed said the Higher Organizing Committee (HOC) is ready for the event, and reflect a good image of Kuwait that has the ability and competence to host major tournaments following the sports suspension abroad.

Al-Jarayed said HOC was keen on relying on Kuwaiti youth in all tournament committees due to our confidence in them and ability to ensure the success of the event. He said several sub-committees were formed for the tournament that will start tomorrow (Wednesday), at Kuwait Sports Club, to serve participating delega-



Nawaf Al-Jarayed

tions, adding that the tournament is very important for Kuwait handball, as it will help in developing the game after the international suspension, which is the sought after goal of Kuwait Handball Federation.

Meanwhile, Kuwait handball team coach Saeed Hajazi said the team prepared well to compete adding that Qatari camp achieved its goals, as players exerted major efforts in complying with the training program. He expected tough competition due to a large number of teams who are expected to win.

He said our goal is clear, which is to compete for the title, but we are acting according to a gradual strategy, as we plan to get past the first round, then go for the title.

Kazema handball team coach Rabeah Gharby said his team is ready and well prepared for the Asian tournament, despite the difficulty to organize a training camp because most players are committed to their jobs.

He said Kazema team is looking forward to a good performance despite the lack of foreign participation for a long time, adding that his team has the elements that qualify them to achieve its goals, especially after signing three Serbian players.

He said despite the group's difficulty, chances remain equal for the three teams to reach the second round of the tournament.

Japan's 'Ice Prince' Hanyu skips worlds practice

SAITAMA: Japan's "Ice Prince" Yuzuru Hanyu skipped training yesterday ahead of this week's world figure skating championships, triggering fresh fitness fears over the Olympic champion. The 24-year-old, who retained his Olympic title last year after an injury-hit build-up, opted against an early morning practice in Saitama as he continues to recover from strained ankle ligaments that sidelined him for December's Japanese nationals.

Hanyu's coach Brian Orser insisted he was "very confident" the two-time world champion would be fit, guaranteeing a fresh wave of "Yuzu-Mania" from the skater's legions of adoring female fans who shower him with stuffed Winnie the Pooh bears after his performances.

But with Hanyu struggling, American Nathan Chen arguably starts as a slight favourite to defend his world title, despite having to balance his studies at Yale university. "I'm really glad I gave myself a shot to attempt both," said the 19-year-old, who landed a record six quad jumps in a programme at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games in winning the free skate, though still finished outside the medals.

"My skating has been going well too, so I can't complain. The worlds is a whole other ballgame." Hanyu's arrival in South Korea last year was also shrouded in mystery after he twisted his ankle just weeks before the Olympics.

The snake-hipped superstar has been training in secrecy once more in the run-up to the world championships in Saitama, where he captured his first world title in 2014 a month after winning gold at the Sochi Olympics.

Hanyu needed painkilling shots in Pyeongchang, where he became the first man to capture back-to-back Olympic figure skating gold medals in 66 years.

His gutsy performance broke the internet, while Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe admitted he had got so excited watching on television he almost squashed a tangerine to a pulp.

Meanwhile, fellow Japanese Shoma Uno, who took silver behind Hanyu at the 2018 Olympics, also skipped practice on Monday-to the disappointment of more than 200 waiting press.

Few would bet against Hanyu should he recover, but Chen and Uno—who swept to gold at the recent Four Continents meet with a record-breaking free skate—will push him close.

The host nation will be hoping teenage sensation Rika Kihira can replicate her form during a remarkable senior debut season as she seeks to become the first Japanese women's world champion since Mao Asada in 2014.

Kihira stormed to victory in both her grand prix events, the Grand Prix Final and the Four Continents, and the 16-year-old promised to put on a show for the home fans.

Olympic champion Alina Zagitova will be her biggest threat as the Russian tries to atone for a fifth-place finish at last year's worlds. — AFP

Jones to call up 'pressure coach' after Scotland slump

TWICKENHAM: Eddie Jones will bring in a specialist coach to help his side play better under pressure after a stunning Six Nations implosion against Scotland raised questions about the team's ability to mount a challenge for this year's World Cup in Japan.

Jones loves cricket and his England side sometimes give the appearance of being 'flat-track bullies' who struggle when a decent opponent has the temerity to play well against them for a spell in a match.

This was evident in their second-half slump from a winning position during a defeat by eventual Grand Slam champions Wales in Cardiff last month and even more apparent in Saturday's astounding Calcutta Cup clash with Scotland.

England surged into a 31-0 lead by 30 minutes on their Twickenham home ground before a thrilling match ended in a 38-38 draw, with the Scots only denied a famous victory by replacement fly-half George Ford's converted stoppage-time try.

It was an extraordinary finish to a Six Nations that had started so promisingly for England with a win away to defending champions Ireland, with their last competitive match before the World Cup gets underway in September leaving Jones' men with some awkward questions.

Jones, however, believes the problems are "fixable" in the intervening months even though he traces their origin back to the last World Cup four years ago when hosts England, then coached by Stuart Lancaster, suffered an embarrassing first-round exit after pool defeats by Wales and Australia.

Those reverses led the Rugby Football Union to sack Lancaster and appoint

experienced Australian coach Jones, who was in charge of the Wallaby side that lost the 2003 World Cup to an England team under the control of Clive Woodward—famous for his mantra of TCUP or Thinking Correctly Under Pressure.

"It's about how the team thinks under pressure," said Jones, who took off captain Owen Farrell after the fly-half made errors that led directly to two Scotland tries.

"It's like we have some hand grenades in the back of a jeep and sometimes they go off when there's a lot of pressure. We have a few of them and we've got to get rid of them."

Jones, who at the last edition of the global showpiece coached Japan to a huge upset win over South Africa, added of England: "The team has probably had it since the 2015 World Cup and we've been working on a process to fix it. We will get it right, but it takes time.

"Sometimes it takes longer than you'd like to fix it, but it is fixable. It comes in when you get under pressure, a lot of pressure, and you can't work out a way to get back to what you want to do.

"I've got one person that's going to help us that's a bit of an expert. I'm not sharing that name with you now. I haven't used her before." England did not know what it was to lose at the start of Jones' reign but he said: "When we won 18 games in a row, we still had those problems. And they have come to the fore in a couple of games recently which is beneficial for us because it's made it quite clear what we have to fix to be the best team in the world."

It appeared the team lacked the collective maturity to cope with the impact of the flamboyant attacking game they played in Saturday's first half. They may now be in danger of over-correcting and settling back into a more traditional Red Rose forward orientated game when some of the silky skills on show at Twickenham could yet prove useful come the World Cup.

But Ben Youngs, now England's most-capped scrum-half, offered an illuminating summary of their failings in Saturday's match when he said they had been "too loose, too flippant with the ball". — AFP

McIlroy wins Players Championship by one stroke in Florida

FLORIDA: Rory McIlroy celebrated St Patrick's Day in style by becoming the first player from Northern Ireland to win the Players Championship, emerging as the last man standing to beat Jim Furyk by one stroke in Ponte Vedra, Florida on Sunday.

On a day when 15 players at one stage were within two shots of the lead, McIlroy eventually emerged from the pack, overcoming an early double-bogey by displaying enough maturity to hang tough before moving in for the proverbial kill.

McIlroy carded two-under-par 70 at the famous TPC Sawgrass course in Ponte Vedra Beach to win a championship that was first held in 1974, when it was won by Jack Nicklaus.

McIlroy finished at 16-under 272 to edge American Furyk, who with a gimme birdie at the final hole threatened to become the event's oldest winner at the age of 48. "Sawgrass and I didn't have the greatest relationship starting off," McIlroy told reporters, referring to missed cuts in his first three appearances from 2009-11.

"It's a massive win on a course (where) I've had mixed results. I had to show a lot of character out there. Any time I looked at the leaderboard I was pleasantly surprised I hadn't fallen two or three shots behind. "That gave me a little bit of encouragement to keep going and play a great back nine. I am just thankful that it was my turn this week." With Furyk already in the clubhouse, the 29-year-old McIlroy knew what he had to do as he played the final three holes.

After a birdie at the par-four 15th, he used his power to reach the par-five 16th in two shots and a two-putt birdie gave him the lead. McIlroy then safely negotiated the water-lined final two holes with tap-in pars to clinch the most prestigious tournament outside the four majors. Furyk shot 67 to finish alone on 15-under.

"There's a little disappointment, thinking maybe I played well enough to win," said the American. "Rory obviously felt differently." It was Furyk's 31st runner-up finish on the PGA Tour, the same number as Tiger Woods who has also won 80 times compared to his compatriot's 17.

Englishman Eddie Pepperell (66) and Venezuelan Jhonattan Vegas (66) finished two strokes behind McIlroy in a tie for third. Pepperell and Vegas sank monster birdies at the par-three 17th, Pepperell sinking a rollercoaster 50-footer before Vegas one-upped him with a 70-footer.

Overnight leader Jon Rahm floundered, the Spaniard making three bogeys in the first four holes and compounding his misery by dunking his tee shot into the water at the par-three 17th.

He shot 76 and finished equal 12th on 11-under. McIlroy's win came after close calls at all five of his previous starts this year. He will head to the Masters next month brimming with confidence, needing a victory at Augusta National to complete the grand slam of all four modern majors.

"I'm just really proud of myself the way I played the last few holes," he said. "(I was thinking) why not me? This is my tournament and I've got to finish it off. "I kept telling myself on the way to the 17th tee, just make three more good swings, that's all you need to do and this thing is yours. — Reuters