

Sports

Murray going 'in right direction' after biggest win since return

Barty, Osaka ease into China Open last 16, Kerber knocked out

BEIJING: Andy Murray said his return to tennis is going "in the right direction" after the former number one claimed his biggest scalp yesterday since career-saving hip surgery. The Briton defeated US Open semi-finalist Matteo Berrettini 7-6 (7/2), 7-6 (9/7) in just over two hours at the China Open in smoggy Beijing.

Murray meets compatriot Cameron Norrie in the last 16 after a gutsy victory over the 13th-ranked Italian. Murray, 32, a three-time Grand Slam winner, said he had made big strides since the first singles match of his return, a defeat at the Cincinnati Masters in mid-August.

Last week in Zhuhai he won his first ATP singles match since January's major operation. "I didn't really feel like I was playing at a great level," he said of his match against Richard Gasquet in Cincinnati.

"Whereas even last week (in Zhuhai), although I lost in the second round, I felt like I was playing tour-level tennis." "I think things are going in the right direction," added Murray. Now ranked 503 in the world, he fought back from a break down to force a tiebreak in the first set against the Italian Berrettini.

Murray showed glimpses of the steely determination which made him number one in 2016 as he grabbed the first set from the eighth seed. The second set went with serve and again to a tiebreak, with Murray saving two set points on the way to a win.

Murray said that patience was now the key. "Last week was a big step for me," he said. "Now I just need to try and get the matches, get them consistently, so that I'm used to playing three, four matches in a week."

"Right now, at this level, I don't know if I'm ready to do that or not. "So the more I can get through these

sort of matches like I did today, I'll get there a little bit quicker."

Also in the men's draw, Felix Auger-Aliassime set up a mouthwatering clash with second seed Alexander Zverev of Germany. The 19-year-old Canadian, rated one of the finest young talents in tennis, beat Albert Ramos Vinolas 6-3, 6-4. Top seed Dominic Thiem defeated Richard Gasquet, 6-4, 6-1.

On the women's side of the tournament, world number one Ashleigh Barty, reigning champion Caroline Wozniacki and Naomi Osaka all comfortably reached the last 16.

Barty, troubled by a calf problem last week in Wuhan, said she felt no ill effects in a 6-4, 6-2 win over Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva. "We had a couple light days. We didn't really test it (the leg) until today," said the 23-year-old Australian.

"I didn't play any points or anything, practice any points, simulation until today. "I think it was about going back out there and knowing we've done everything we could, trusting it."

The 21-year-old Japanese Osaka ruthlessly blew away Germany's Andrea Petkovic, 6-2, 6-0, in just 59 minutes. The Dane Wozniacki defeated Christina McHale of the United States, 6-4, 6-0.

Angelique Kerber's poor form dragged on after another early exit at the hands of Slovenia's Polona Herczeg who won 6-4 6-2. Apart from a semi-final run in Osaka, 10th seed Kerber has not moved past the second round of tournaments in Zhengzhou, Wuhan and now Beijing.

China's Zheng Saisai converted five of six break points to beat former US Open champion Sloane Stephens 6-3 6-1 in 76 minutes to set up a last-16



Ashleigh Barty

clash with Barty.

Czech Republic's Petra Kvitova beat France's Kristina Mladenovic 6-4 6-4 but 12th seed Aryna

Sabalanka, who won the Wuhan Open title over the weekend was knocked out by Russia's unseeded Daria Kasatkina 6-4 7-6(5). — Agencies

Pakistan beat S Lanka in historic Karachi ODI, take series lead



KARACHI: Pakistan's batsman Babar Azam (C) plays a shot as Sri Lanka's wicketkeeper Sadeera Samarawickrama (R) looks on during the second one day international (ODI) cricket match between Pakistan and Sri Lanka at the National Cricket Stadium in Karachi. — AFP

KARACHI: Pakistan rode on a brilliant century from Babar Azam and fast bowler Usman Shinwari's five wickets to beat Sri Lanka by 67 runs in the second day-night international on Monday as Karachi staged its first ODI in a decade. Azam, currently one of the best batsmen in limited overs cricket, smashed a solid 105-ball 115 to lift Pakistan to 305-7 after the home team won the toss and batted. Shinwari then knocked off the top-order in figures of 5-51 as the visitors — depleted by the withdrawal of 10 top players who refused to tour over security fears — were bowled out for 238 in 46.5 overs.

The win gives Pakistan a 1-0 lead in the three-match series with the first ODI rained off in Karachi on Friday. The third and final match is also set for the same venue on Wednesday.

Sri Lanka were down and out at 28-5 before youngsters Shehan Jayasuriya and Dasun Shanaka staged a fightback during their record 177-run stand — an ODI record for this wicket for Sri Lanka. Jayasuriya missed his maiden hundred by four runs while Shanaka notched his highest ODI score of 68, but both fell in the space of three balls to surrender the fight.

Jayasuriya hit seven boundaries and a six in his

107-ball knock while Shanaka had six fours and two sixes in his 80 balls. The match marked the first ODI cricket to be played in Karachi since the same two teams played here in January 2009, on the tour when the visitors' bus was attacked by terrorists in Lahore. International cricket remained suspended in Pakistan for six years before Zimbabwe became the first team to play here in 2015. Pakistan also hosted a World XI (three Twenty20s), Sri Lanka (one T20 international) and the West Indies (three T20) in the last three years.

Like in the recent series, Pakistan have put in place stringent security arrangements for the Sri Lankan team, with 2,000 security personnel in and around teams' hotels and stadium.

A crowd of 12,000 came to watch the return of ODI cricket to their city, weathering heat and various security check-posts, using special shuttles to reach the National stadium.

Shinwari dismissed Sadeera Samarawickrama (six), Avishka Fernando (nought) and skipper (Lahiru Thirimanne (nought) to rattle Sri Lanka to 22-4 by the eighth over.

Jayasuriya and Shanaka bettered the previous best sixth wicket stand of 159 between Chamara Kapugedera and Chamara Silva against the West

Indies at Port of Spain in 2008.

It was Azam who treated the fans in the afternoon. Azam, when on 54, became the fifth batsman to complete 1,000 ODI runs in 2019 — behind India's duo Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, and Australian couple Aaron Finch and Usman Khawaja.

He added an innings-building 111 for the third wicket with Haris Sohail (40), as Sri Lankan bowlers toiled to break the stand. It was only through an unfortunate run out that Sohail fell, leaving Azam to anchor the innings. He square cut pacer Lahiru Kumara for a boundary to complete his 11th ODI hundred off 97 balls.

Azam was finally out at deep mid-on off Kumara, cracking eight boundaries and four sixes. Ifukhar Ahmed batted aggressively for his 20-ball 32 not out — two sixes and as many boundaries — as Pakistan made 89 in the last 10 overs.

Openers Fakhar Zaman (54) and Imam-ul-Haq gave Pakistan a solid start of 73 before Sri Lanka's best bowler, leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga, trapped Imam for 31. Hasaranga also had Fakhar for a 65-ball 54 that was studded with six boundaries and a six. Hasaranga finished with 2-63. — AFP

India cause shock by dropping Pant

VISAKHAPATNAM: India yesterday brought Wriddhiman Saha back as wicketkeeper for the first Test against South Africa in a blow to the hopes of rising star Rishabh Pant.

India's captain Virat Kohli also gave a vote of confidence to Rohit Sharma, naming him opening batsman ahead of the start of the three-match series on Wednesday.

The 34-year-old Saha last played a test more than 18 months ago in South Africa. He gets a new chance because of the poor form of Pant, who had been groomed as the long-term successor to legendary batsman wicketkeeper M.S. Dhoni.

Saha lost his place through injury and Pant initially made the most of his opportunity to showcase his explosive batting talent.

"Saha is fit and fine to go. He is going to start the series for us. His keeping credentials are for everyone to see," said Kohli, whose side will beat Australia's record of victory in 10 straight home Test series if they take this series.

"Saha was always the one we would back as a

pure keeper in test cricket. He has done well under pressure situations in the past for us, so it was just about finding the right opportunity and the moment to bring him back in.

"He has done well with the bat whenever he has got a chance. It was unfortunate that he was out with an injury. According to me he is the best keeper in the world. With these conditions he starts for us."

The 32-year-old Sharma is another veteran looking to stake a new claim in Visakhapatnam after a stop-start career of 27 Test matches.

"Rohit is going to start for sure," Kohli told reporters, comparing Sharma's ability to "demolish attacks" to that of Virender Sehwag.

NO 'BAGGAGE' TEAM

Sharma, India's limited-overs vice-captain, gets a new opportunity to seal a place as opener after Lokesh Rahul's form dropped off.

"We have given people opportunities in the past... Rohit's been in the Test set up for a long time it's about providing him the opportunity to really find his game and find that template that he wants to in Test cricket," said Kohli.

"And we understand that if he does that, then our batting order at the top becomes more lethal. It's difficult to have a player like him not to start

every time." Kohli said two spinners, Ravindra Jadeja and Ravichandran Ashwin, would also be in the team along with two pace bowlers and all-rounder Hanuma Vihari.

South Africa skipper Faf du Plessis is meanwhile looking to a new generation side to get over the nightmare 2015 tour of India when the Proteas lost a four-match series 3-0.

Former captain Hashim Amla quit the game in August while bowler Dale Steyn gave up Tests.

"We struggled (in 2015) despite having an experienced line-up and now we have a young looking line up, there is no baggage," said du Plessis.

"These youngsters are motivated to do well in international cricket and this tour will be no different for them," the captain added.

"Time to grow new leaders, the next set of pacers the next set of Hashim Amlas."

Du Plessis said the 2015 tour had taught him to handle top class spin bowling while the reverse swing shot can be a "real weapon" in South Asia.

India XI for first Test: Virat Kohli (capt), Ajinkya Rahane (vice-captain), Rohit Sharma, Mayank Agarwal, Cheteshwar Pujara, Hanuma Vihari, Ravichandran Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Wriddhiman Saha (wk), Ishant Sharma, Mohammed Shami. — AFP

Djokovic returns to winning in Japan

TOKYO: World number one Novak Djokovic displayed steady recovery of his left shoulder injury yesterday by defeating an Australian challenger at the Japan Open, his first competition since pulling out of the US Open.

The experienced Serbian top-seed claimed a 6-4, 6-2 victory against 20-year-old Alexei Popyrin, who fought bravely at the Ariake Colosseum, a venue for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

Djokovic added his shoulder felt "good" and declared that he has set his eyes on an Olympic medal next year. Popyrin mixed big serves with delicate drop shots to stage courageous offensives against 32-year-old Djokovic. But Djokovic, taking part in a Japanese competition for the first time, kept his calm to always stay a step above the Aussie, never giving his opponent a break point, consistently playing at a "high-level" with "good intensity."

Djokovic nailed seven aces, against eight by Popyrin, and managed to win points on 84 percent of his successful first serves. He finished the roughly 90-minute match by winning the final five games straight. He will now face Japanese wild card Go Soeda today. "Very pleased overall with the game," Djokovic said after the win. It was his first singles competition since he withdrew from his US Open fourth-round match against Swiss Stan Wawrinka due to a left shoulder injury.

Djokovic said he has no immediate worries about his shoulder. "I have not felt anything in previous days, including today on the match. So I am very pleased to say that I feel healthy," he said.

When asked about his ambitions about winning an Olympic gold medal in Tokyo next year, Djokovic said it would be "a dream come true." "It definitely is one of the greatest wishes, if I can say so, the gold in the next season and the rest of my career," said Djokovic, a bronze medal winner at the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

"Hopefully I can get at least a step further in Tokyo. I still feel young in my body and my spirit as well. I still feel motivated to do great things on the court," he said. Meanwhile, Djokovic was marking his 271st week as the world's number one, claiming the title of the third longest weeks in the top spot, and passing the record of American great Ivan Lendl.

The Serbian is now chasing Pete Sampras with 286 weeks, and Roger Federer with 310 weeks. In the rest of the Tokyo tournament, Japanese wild card Taro Daniel, ranked 127, pulled off an upset victory against second-seeded Borna Coric of Croatia, ranked 14th, with a 6-4, 4-6, 7-6(7/5) win in a gruelling match that stretched over two hours and 30 minutes. — AFP

AB de Villiers to make Big Bash debut with Brisbane Heat

SYDNEY: South African great AB de Villiers will make his debut in Australia's Twenty20 Big Bash League during the 2019-20 season after signing with Brisbane Heat, the team announced yesterday. The 35-year-old prolific batsman will join the Heat for the second half of the eight-team competition that runs from December to February.

Coach Darren Lehmann said he was "over the moon" to have the opportunity to work with de Villiers for the first time. "World class players don't just come along every day and to have a player of AB's stature and skill in the BBL is a fantastic outcome for everyone, not just the Heat," he said.

"He's a 360-degree player, great skills, outstanding temperament and an insightful leader." De Villiers played 114 Tests, 228 one-dayers and 78 Twenty20s in a 14-year career for the Proteas before retiring from international cricket in 2018.

He starred for the Royal Challengers Bangalore in this year's Indian Premier League, scoring 442 runs at an average of 44.20 with a rapid strike rate of 154. He said the decision to join the Heat for the BBL from January, including the finals should they qualify, was an easy one to make. "They play the kind of brand that I want to be associated with. It's quite aggressive, they go after the attack, and I'm looking forward to going to the Gabba," de Villiers said. "It's a beautiful cricket field. It's a great wicket and games are always of a high quality." — AFP