

KVITOVA ENDS TITLE DROUGHT WITH WUHAN WIN

WUHAN: Two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova ended her 13-month title drought with a straight set win over Dominika Cibulkova at the Wuhan Open yesterday. The former world number two appeared to be in a hurry to secure the crown her second in Wuhan-taking just over an hour to defeat Cibulkova 6-1, 6-1. Kvitova has had a year of stark highs and lows-scooping an Olympic bronze medal but failing to get further than the round of 16 at any of the Grand Slams. "I need this kind of consistency all year, which to be honest, I don't think I can really do that. I'm probably the player who has up and downs," Kvitova told reporters after the final.

"I'm happy that my ups, they are really high, which I love of course. The downs are very low, but that's how it is." The year began with a split from coach of seven years David Kotyza and she has since taken an unconventional approach to her game and paired back her time on the practice court.

"I just reduced the practices and I feel a little bit better, more in love with the tennis or something," she said. "I mean,

without the practicing, it's not possible. But I really need to find a balance, to have some time off to enjoy a day."

After the run of early round exits at the start of the year, she appears to have turned the tide in China and the Wuhan title will see her move to 11th in the rankings when next week's leaderboard is released on Monday. She also has an outside chance of qualifying for her fifth consecutive WTA Final in Singapore. Cibulkova, meanwhile, is assured of a new career-high ranking on Monday - rising to number eight. She also now sits at number seven on the Road to Singapore leaderboard but needs a strong run in Beijing next week to guarantee her first ever qualification in the elite eight-player event. "I'm not thinking about Singapore that much because that would be a dream come true if I would get there," said Cibulkova. "I don't want to make too much pressure on myself."

'Power player'

Wuhan was the fifth final of the season for the newly wed Slovak who also

reached the quarter finals of Wimbledon, saving a match point in a three set thriller against fourth-ranked Agnieszka Radwanska, and won two titles this year. It marks an impressive comeback after surgery on her left Achilles tendon forced her off the court for four months in 2015. After a three-and-a-half-hour epic against new world number one Angelique Kerber in the third round, Kvitova has looked untouchable on court-hitting 143 winners in four matches. "She was really powerful from the first strokes. That's how she overpowered me today," Cibulkova told reporters after the match. "When she's playing like this, she can beat anybody."

The first point of the final went to Cibulkova but Kvitova then dominated for the next three games until the Czech double faulted to concede the fourth. The Olympic bronze medalist bagged the first set on an ace-her seventh of the match. Kvitova was two points up in the second when Cibulkova held her service game to take the score to 2-1. But the six-foot Czech towered over her 5'3" opponent for the rest of the match,



WUHAN: Petra Kvitova of the Czech Republic hits a return to Dominika Cibulkova of Slovakia during the final of the WTA Wuhan Open tennis tournament in Wuhan, in China's central Hubei province yesterday. — AFP

breaking her serve to snatch the title on the first match point. "I think I always knew that I'm kind of the power player on the tour. But it's always tough for me to find the balance between the power

and (not missing) some easy shots," Kvitova said. Both Kvitova and Cibulkova now travel to Beijing for the China Open where they have first round byes.—AFP

CHINA'S QIAO ADVANCES TO FINAL AT KOREA OPEN

SEOUL: China's Qiao Bin yesterday survived a stiff test from Hong Kong's Wong Wing-Ki to advance to the men's singles final at the Badminton World Federation Korea Open. Qiao defeated Wong 21-18, 21-16 as the Hongkonger, who survived a long quarter-final the previous day, couldn't quite dig deep enough. "He was quicker than me today," said Wong. "I think my long quarter-final against Tian Houwei yesterday made me slightly slower."

Qiao will clash with South Korea's Son Wan-Ho, who defeated compatriot Lee Hyun-Il 21-13, 14-21, 21-10 to secure a berth at the final. In the women's tournament, South Korea's Sung Ji-Hyun made her second straight Korea Open final by routing younger teammate Kim Hyo Min 21-5, 21-10. Sung will meet with Japan's Akane Yamaguchi, who brushed aside compatriot Minatsu Mitani, 21-17, 21-11. Men's Doubles

great Lee Yong-Dae and partner Yoo Yeon-Seong of South Korea overcame China's Wang Yilyu/Huang Kaixiang 21-11, 21-16. The Korean couple will face Li Junhui/Liu Yuchen, who made their second Superseries final in two weeks. The Chinese-champions at last week's Yonex Open Japan-took their time to get going against Malaysia's Goh V Shem/Tan Wee Kiong, but shot ahead in the end, 18-21, 21-15, 21-13. China's Luo Ying and Luo Yu ruined Olympic Women's doubles silver medalists Christinna Pedersen/Kamilla Rytter Juhl's quest for a second straight Superseries title. The Luos made their first Superseries final this year with the 21-15, 17-21, 21-12 result. The twins will now take on Olympic bronze medalists Jung Kyung-Eun/Shin Seung-Chan of South Korea, who overpowered compatriots Chang Ye-Na/Lee So-Hee 23-21, 21-15 in an earlier semi-final.—AFP

IN IRELAND, GAELIC FOOTBALL IS THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

DUBLIN: The biggest crowd in Europe will not be watching detached professionals kissing the badge of their latest football team, but at the All-Ireland Gaelic football final. Two amateur teams, Dublin and Mayo, will attempt to win the coveted All-Ireland trophy for Gaelic football in a replay following a rare draw two weeks ago. Every year players from 32 counties across the island of Ireland, plus teams of emigrants in London and New York, compete for the GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) Sam McGuire Cup.

Yesterday evening, fans from all over the globe crammed into Dublin's 82,300-capacity Croke Park, some having paid many multiples of the 60 euros (\$67) ticket price. "The All-Ireland final will beat any World Cup final or European final, trust me," says former Manchester United and Ireland football captain Roy Keane. "It's about local pride, that's what GAA is—people representing their parishes and the streets where they grew up."

"Gaelic football in Ireland is different. They don't move clubs when they get fed up. They represent the people they're brought up with." Ireland's national sport mixes the pace, power and skill-sets of football, rugby and basketball. Encounters are typically bruising affairs where fouls can be difficult to define. It is not a sport for the faint of heart. The pitch is similar to a rugby union pitch, but larger, while the goals at each end are H-shaped with football-style goal nets extending behind them.

The scoring is relatively simple: three points for a goal and one if the ball, which is like a standard football only slightly smaller, is kicked or punched over the bar and between the posts. Dublin, last year's winners, are the hot favorites. Mayo, a county on the western seaboard, have come close five times in recent years, but have not lifted the trophy since 1951. It is the first replay in 16 years and will be worth more than three million euros to GAA coffers. Last time out, Mayo snatched a draw deep in additional time, but many analysts believe they deserved to win, prompting much discussion of 'the curse' that supposedly hangs over the county.

'Here to witness history'

The story goes that the last time Mayo won the trophy in 1951 they failed to pay their respects while passing a funeral as they passed through the county on a victorious homecoming journey. As a result, a priest apparently warned that Mayo would never win another All-Ireland until all of them had died. Two of that team are still alive. Speculation that tickets might be easier to come by second time round turned out to be wishful thinking. Fans of both counties dressed in the blue of Dublin and red and green of Mayo thronged the streets and bars of Dublin from early Saturday morning, many scouting for spare tickets. Sipping a pre-match pint of Guinness at the Big Tree pub near Croke Park, Sean Duffy, 51, from the little village of Louisburgh in Mayo, told AFP he would likely "endure more than enjoy" the match. "I'm here to witness history," he said. "Many a man hasn't lived long enough to see this day so I have to be here in case we do it today." Few stadiums wear their heart on their sleeves quite like Croke Park, the stands of which are named after Irish patriots. It was the scene of what became known as Bloody Sunday, when British troops drove into the stadium during a match in 1920 and massacred 14 people in response to shootings by the IRA (Irish Republican Army). One terrace, Hill 16, was built from the rubble of the 1916 Easter Rising, the catalyst for independence from Britain. The country will again come to a standstill on Saturday evening: almost one million people watched the last match, 70 percent of the Irish viewing public.

Generations of expats will join them in some of the furthest flung corners of the world. Paul Gorman, 50, a banking official from Dublin, says he would not grudge Mayo the win, but points out that Dublin have not managed back-to-back championship wins since the mid-1970s. As a returned emigrant from England, he says he relishes every opportunity to support his team in a final. "I used to have to watch from afar because of work commitments while I was away, so I wouldn't miss this for the world now that I'm home," he says. "There is simply no better place to be." — AFP



CHASKA: Rory McIlroy of Europe hits out of a bunker on the 12th hole during morning foursome matches of the 2016 Ryder Cup at Hazeltine National Golf Club yesterday in Chaska, Minnesota. —AFP

EMOTIONAL MCILROY LEADS EUROPE CHARGE BUT US LEADS RYDER CUP

CHASKA: An emotional Rory McIlroy led Europe's morning charge yesterday on day two of the Ryder Cup even as the United States clung to a 5-3 lead at Hazeltine. Third-ranked McIlroy and Belgium's Thomas Pieters went off first for Europe against Americans Phil Mickelson and Rickie Fowler in morning alternate shot foursomes matches, Pieters first facing the crucible of 1,500 screaming spectators just after dawn at the first tee and putting his tee shot into the fairway. "We're not going down without a fight," McIlroy said. Americans swept Friday foursomes 4-0, their best start since 1975, only for Europe to go 3-1 in afternoon four-ball matches to close the gap and seize momentum. "We're still behind on the cards in boxing terms," McIlroy said. "We got hit by some pretty good punches out there, but we came back at them pretty well. Still a little bit to do, but momentum has definitely switched to our side."

"We've pulled it back a good bit, and we plan to pull it back even further." The US squad is trying to snap a three-Cup losing streak to Europe, which has dominated by taking the trophy in eight of the past 10 editions of the biennial team golf matches, including the 2012 Miracle at Medinah when Europe made the greatest last-day rally in Cup history to keep the trophy. McIlroy's vigorous yells of "Come on," during his 3-and-2 victory Friday with Pieters in four-ball over US Open champion Dustin Johnson and Matt Kuchar, were followed by bows to the crowd, one he saw as quite hostile, after an eagle putt at the par-5 16th hole closed out the match.

"I did that little celebration at Medinah and it's one I'll continue to do because it's a hostile environment out here and I want them to know how much it means to us," McIlroy said. "And sort of silence them and say, 'You're welcome.' It's nice to do that sometimes." McIlroy, coming off a title at the US PGA's season-ending Tour Championship last weekend, is 3-0 in winning the Cup and hopes his victory dance inspires teammates as well. "I wanted to put an exclamation point on that session for us," McIlroy said. "I honestly actually thought about the celebration before I hit the putt."

Europe captain Darren Clarke broke up his star pairing of Olympic champion Justin Rose and British Open champion Henrik Stenson—who went 1-1 Friday against Jordan Spieth and Patrick Reed—to pair them with newcomers in yesterday foursomes. England's Rose will join countryman Chris Wood against PGA Championship winner Jimmy Walker and two-time major champion Zach Johnson, who won in foursomes Friday. Stenson and England's Matthew Fitzpatrick, the youngest player in the event at 22, come up against Brandt Snedeker and Brooks Koepka.

Spanish duo echo Seve-Jose

The last morning match sees Spieth and Reed facing Spaniards Sergio Garcia and Rafa Cabrera Bello, who teamed to win Friday in four-balls. It was Garcia's 16th tandem triumph and Cabrera

Bello's Ryder Cup debut. "This is very special for us," Garcia said. "He was a rock out there and he gave me so much confidence to go for shots." Cabrera Bello was honored to debut alongside Garcia, mindful of the past Ryder Cup super pairings of compatriots Seve Ballesteros and Jose-Maria Olazabal. "Having my Ryder Cup debut

with a good friend and a countryman was extremely special," he said. Competition continues with four afternoon four-ball matches and concludes today with 12 singles matches. Europe need 14 points to keep the Cup while the US team needs 14 1/2 points to take the trophy.—AFP

NHL 2016-17: ODDS STACKED AGAINST PENGUINS REPEATING

PITTSBURGH: After the Penguins paraded the Stanley Cup through the streets of Pittsburgh, Sidney Crosby took it to his hometown of Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia, Evgeni Malkin to Moscow and Phil Kessel to a children's hospital in Toronto as part of the summer-long celebration. If there's one thing champions in the NHL have learned, it is to savor those moments because history says they won't happen back-to-back. No team has repeated as Cup champion since the salary-cap era began in 2005, and the last back-to-back winners were the Detroit Red Wings in 1997 and 1998. Sorry, Penguins. And sorry to the San Jose Sharks, as no team in the past eight seasons has lost in the final and gotten back the next year.

The Chicago Blackhawks and Los Angeles Kings are rested from an unusually short spring, the Tampa Bay Lightning boast the deepest team in the league and the Washington Capitals are virtually unchanged after dominating the regular season. All those things, plus playing into June, stack the odds against the Penguins raising the Cup again in 2017. "You're coming off such a high, it's going to be tough to get to that (level) right away," Pittsburgh defenseman Trevor Daley said. "How you become a great team in this league is you have the hunger every night. Teams that are proven winners are usually the great teams, the LAs and Chicagos. Pittsburgh is right up there now in that conversation. We're hungry to do it again."

Because they have two top goalies in Matt Murray and Marc-Andre Fleury, the Penguins are perhaps the best positioned team to repeat in recent history. That doesn't mean it'll be easy. Online sportsbook Bovada set the Penguins and Blackhawks as co-Cup favorites with the Capitals, Lightning, Dallas Stars, St. Louis Blues and Sharks not far behind. It wouldn't be a surprise if any of those teams make it through a World Cup of Hockey-condensed regular season and a grueling division playoff format and get to celebrate in June.

"The parity in the league allows for a lot of teams to have the same goal and actually legitimately have a chance at it," said Washington winger Justin Williams, who won the Cup with Carolina in 2006 and Los Angeles in 2012 and 2014. "There's a handful of teams that have those aspirations and they're real." Rather than parity, Commissioner Gary Bettman prefers the term "competitive balance," which speaks not only to the lack of repeat champions and the

death of NHL dynasties but the variance in playoff teams. Of the 30 teams, 24 have made the playoffs at least once over the past three seasons. "Unless you're (cheering for) the team in the dynasty market, you could care less," Bettman said. "All you care about is that your team is competitive." Competition isn't the problem. It's so high that playoff teams can't miss a beat or fear they'll drop out. The Florida Panthers look like a team just beginning a run of playoff appearances with young stars like Aaron Ekblad and Aleksander Barkov, but president of hockey operations Dale Tallon knows it'll come down to breaks and injuries because "it's going to be a battle to return to the playoffs."

It's a battle because the top teams haven't lost much. The Penguins made a few tweaks and will be without Cup-winner Murray to start the season, but they can turn to 2009 winner Fleury and still lean heavily on Crosby, Malkin and defenseman Kris Letang. Elsewhere in the East, the Lightning re-signed Steven Stamkos, the Capitals are primed for another run with Alex Ovechkin and Vezina Trophy winner Braden Holtby, and the Montreal Canadiens should be back in contention with all-world goalie Carey Price healthy after missing most of last season with a knee injury.

Chicago has cycled pieces in and out while winning the Cup in 2010, 2013 and 2015, but the core of Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane and Duncan Keith is as strong as ever. The Blackhawks would have liked to go deeper in last year's playoffs, but not doing so could pay dividends this season as it has in the past. "It might be good for the guys to have a longer off-season and come back hungry for the start of the season," defenseman Niklas Hjalmarsson said. Trading off years with the Boston Bruins' 2011 championship mixed in, the Blackhawks and Kings know all too well about the Cup hangover that the Penguins will try to avoid. Peaking at playoff time and maintaining that level amid injuries and bounces takes a lot, plus the system is skewed against back-to-back champions. "It's more hard than before when teams were really dominating and could spend so much on salaries and they can buy different players," said Blackhawks winger Marian Hossa, who lost in the final in 2008 with Pittsburgh and 2009 with Detroit before winning three times with Chicago. "In this modern day, it's extremely hard. ... It's really, really hard to repeat." —AP



DUBLIN: Dublin supporter Padraic O'Reilly, flanked by Mayo supporters daughter and mother Sarah Barcoe and Anne Barcoe (right) pose for a photograph outside Croke Park ahead of the GAA All-Ireland Gaelic Football Final replay match between Dublin and Mayo at Croke Park, Dublin, Ireland yesterday.—AFP