

Sports

Petra Kvitova blasts past Kerber into Sydney International semis

Veteran Seppi derailed top seed Tsitsipas' title hopes

SYDNEY: Petra Kvitova sent defending champion Angelique Kerber packing from the rain-affected Sydney International yesterday to book a semi-final spot and get an edge over her rival heading into the Australian Open next week.

It was always going to be a tight match with the pair tied 6-6 in 12 previous meetings. Play was suspended early in the first set due to rain. They returned several hours later but the drizzle soon began falling again and it was back to the locker room for the two tournament drawcards.

They eventually resumed at 10:30pm and Czech fifth seed Kvitova, who won the title in 2015, took charge, quickly racing through the first set to put the German world number two on the back foot.

Kvitova kept the pressure on and got a crucial break in game four of the second set and there was no way back for Kerber who meekly surrendered 6-4, 6-1. "The weather has not been great and it's not easy to wait in the locker room, but I was glad I could come back out and play so well," Kvitova said after reaching the semi-finals in Sydney for a fourth time.

Her reward is a clash with Belarusian qualifier Aliaksandra Sasnovich, who beat Switzerland's Timea Bacsinszky—on the comeback trail after a 14-month winless spell — 6-3, 6-3. Australia's Ashleigh Barty followed up her giant-killing wins over world number one Simona Halep and former French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko by

easily accounting for 10th seeded Belgian Elise Mertens 6-3, 6-3.

The 22-year-old is now on a six-match win streak, dating back to her career's biggest title at the WTA Elite Trophy in Zhuhai. "Nice and solid today, I was pretty happy at the way I was able to come out and play," said Barty, ranked 15 in the world.

She will play seventh seed Kiki Bertens who blasted past Yulia Putintseva 6-2, 6-2 for a place in the final.

SEPPI DERAILS TSITSIPAS

In the men's draw, veteran Andreas Seppi derailed top seed Stefanos Tsitsipas' title hopes. Seppi, 14 years older than his 20-year-old Greek opponent, has only won three ATP titles in his career, but called on all his experience as he battled back for a gutsy 4-6, 6-4, 6-4 win.

"For some reason I always play my best tennis in Australia, so I really enjoy being here," said Seppi, who broke immediately in the second set after losing the first. "It was very important to start well in the second set. Good to have an early break so I could play a bit more aggressive and it worked out in the end."

Australia has been a home away from home for the Italian in recent years. In a trio of round-of-16 appearances at the Australian Open, he pulled off upsets against Marin Cilic in 2013, Roger Federer in 2015 and Nick Kyrgios in 2017.



SYDNEY: Petra Kvitova of the Czech Republic hits a return to Angelique Kerber of Germany during their women's singles quarter-final match at the Sydney International tennis tournament in Sydney yesterday. — AFP

Defeat was a blow for world No.15 Tsitsipas' preparations for the opening Grand Slam of the year in Melbourne next week. He was one of the sport's most improved players last year, climbing from 91 after reaching finals in Barcelona and Toronto, losing both to Rafael Nadal, and was angling for the perfect start ahead of the Australian Open.

Seppi will now play third seeded Argentine Diego Schwartzman, who needed to fight hard to beat Japanese qualifier Yoshihito Nishioka 6-1, 3-6, 7-6 (7/1). In other quarter-final action, fifth seeded teenager Alex De Minaur continued his strong start to the season with a 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 victory over fellow Australian Jordan Thompson. — AFP

Djokovic, Halep top seeds at Australian Open

MELBOURNE: World number ones Novak Djokovic and Simona Halep were named top seeds yesterday for next week's Australian Open, with 23-time major winner Serena Williams lurking at 16 on the women's side.

Djokovic heads long-time rival Rafael Nadal and defending champion Roger Federer, with young-gun Alexander Zverev seeded four as he targets a maiden Grand Slam title. The Serbian world number one is aiming to make history by claiming a record seventh Australian Open crown when the tournament starts at Melbourne Park on Monday, as is Swiss legend Federer.

The pair face a stern challenge from Zverev, the torch-bearer for the next generation who has so far failed to get beyond the quarter-finals at any major. With world number five Juan Martin del Potro missing through injury, South Africa's Kevin Anderson is elevated to fifth seed with last year's beaten finalist Marin Cilic at six. Halep takes the top seeding among the women courtesy of her world number one ranking, but she enters the tournament with only one match in four months under her belt after an injury lay off.

The Romanian, the beaten finalist last year, is returning from a herniated disc and was bundled out of the Sydney International on

Wednesday at the first hurdle. Denmark's defending champion Caroline Wozniacki, who is battling health problems and poor form, is seeded three, one behind Germany's Angelique Kerber.

US Open champion Naomi Osaka is at four while Sloane Stephens, who also slumped out of Sydney early, is at five. Overshadowing them all is the mighty Williams, who last played the tournament in 2017 when she won while eight weeks pregnant. The 37-year-old enters the tournament seeded 16, but has proved in the past that such numbers mean little to her. She is the hot favourite to claim a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam.

MEN'S SINGLES

1. Novak Djokovic (SRB), 2. Rafael Nadal (ESP), 3. Roger Federer (SUI), 4. Alexander Zverev (GER), 5. Kevin Anderson (RSA), 6. Marin Cilic (CRO), 7. Dominic Thiem (AUT), 8. Kei Nishikori (JPN), 9. John Isner (USA), 10. Karen Khachanov (RUS), 11. Borna Coric (CRO), 12. Fabio Fognini (ITA), 13. Kyle Edmund (GBR), 14. Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE), 15. Daniil Medvedev (RUS), 16. Milos Raonic (CAN), 17. Marco Cecchinato (ITA), 18. Diego Schwartzman (ARG), 19. Nikoloz Basilashvili (GEO), 20. Grigor Dimitrov (BUL), 21. David Goffin (BEL), 22. Roberto Agut Bautista (ESP), 23. Pablo Carreno Busta (ESP), 24. Chung Hyeon (KOR), 25. Denis Shapovalov (CAN), 26. Fernando Verdasco (ESP), 27. Alex de Minaur (AUS), 28. Lucas Pouille (FRA), 29. Gilles Simon (FRA), 30. Gael Monfils (FRA), 31. Steve Johnson (USA), 32. Philipp Kohlschreiber (GER).

WOMEN'S SINGLES

1. Simona Halep (ROU), 2. Angelique Kerber (GER), 3. Caroline Wozniacki (DEN), 4. Naomi Osaka (JPN), 5. Sloane Stephens (USA), 6. Elina Svitolina (UKR), 7. Karolina Pliskova (CZE), 8. Petra Kvitova (CZE), 9. Kiki Bertens (NED), 10. Daria Kasatkina (RUS), 11. Aryna Sabalenka (BLR), 12. Elise Mertens (BEL), 13. Anastasija Sevastova (LAT), 14. Julia Goerges (GER), 15. Ashleigh Barty (AUS), 16. Serena Williams (USA), 17. Madison Keys (USA), 18. Garbine Muguruza (ESP), 19. Caroline Garcia (FRA), 20. Anett Kontaveit (EST), 21. Qiang Wang (CHN), 22. Jelena Ostapenko (LAT), 23. Carla Suarez Navarro (ESP), 24. Lesia Tsurenko (UKR), 25. Mihaela Buzarnescu (ROU), 26. Dominika Cibulkova (SVK), 27. Camila Giorgi (ITA), 28. Hsieh Suwei (TPE), 29. Donna Vekic (CRO), 30. Maria Sharapova (RUS), 31. Petra Martic (CRO), 32. Barbora Strycova (CZE). —AFP



Simona Halep

Kohlschreiber flogs feeble Fognini in Auckland quarters

WELLINGTON: Evergreen Philipp Kohlschreiber rolled back the years to storm into the Auckland Classic semi-finals yesterday with a straight-sets demolition of second seed Fabio Fognini.

The 35-year-old German tore apart the lacklustre Italian 6-3, 6-1 to remain in the reckoning at a tournament where he claimed the title way in back in 2008. Currently ranked 34th in the world, Kohlschreiber has not dropped a set on his way to a final four showdown with American Tennyson Sandgren, who beat Argentina's Leonardo Mayer 6-3, 7-6 (7/5).

The other semi-final pits Briton Cameron Norrie—a victor over American Tyler Fritz—against Jan-Lennard Struff of Germany. Kohlschreiber, unseeded this year, was a class above world number 13 Fognini, who appeared unfocused and more interested in boarding a plane to next week's Australian Open in Melbourne.

Despite his advancing years, the veteran is shaping as a strong contender in a field weakened by withdrawals and upset results that have sent all the seeds heading for the exits. Kohlschreiber comfortably beat Sandgren in straight sets in their only previous meeting in Monte Carlo last year.

"I'm still improving my game even at 35-years old... I have to be ready for the young ones and I'll try to continue to play for a few years yet," he said. Kohlschreiber raced to an early break in the first set then held on as Fognini stretched the German's next service game out for 10 minutes trying to respond. — AFP