

Like she never left

Ripping forehand, court-craft and experience of six Major titles help Sania win title in first comeback event

SHAHID JUDGE
MUMBAI, JANUARY 18

THE LAST time Sania Mirza stepped on court for a competitive match — in October 2017 — the tennis world was ‘different’. Two-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka was then ranked 62nd in the world, Stefanos Tsitsipas, the current men’s world No 6 had not broken into the top 100, and Andy Murray — who has been contemplating retirement of late, was still the world No 3. Mirza too felt the change when she came back to the tour earlier this week.

“The first practice we were hitting in,” says Nadiia Kichenok, Mirza new doubles partner, in a press conference, “she’s asking me, ‘I heard that tennis has changed.’ But she was unbelievable (in training). It’s like she hasn’t missed a thing. She’s still at that level.”

The Ukrainian refers to Mirza’s ripping forehands, her court-craft and the experience of winning six Grand Slam titles — all of which remain dominant in her return to the sport after a two-year hiatus. And on Saturday, Mirza marked that comeback with a title in her first event after a maternity break. Mirza-Kichenok scored a 6-4, 6-4 win over Chinese pair Peng Shuai and Zhang Shuai in the final of the Hobart International to earn the Indian her 42nd doubles title.

“It means everything,” Mirza says after the match. “I honestly thought I’d be rustier than I am. Luckily I was not as rusty as I thought, but I do think I can improve on some things. But that’s me, even after winning a Grand Slam I’m not happy with the way that I played, so I always want to be better. But to do it after (giving birth to) Ishaan is very special to me.”

When the 33-year-old played at the China Open in Beijing in 2017, her last tournament before the break, she had already been ranked No 1 in the world, stayed at the summit for 91 weeks, and had six majors — three in women’s doubles and three mixed doubles — to her name. The need for a knee surgery though first forced her to take time away from the sport, then the decision to start a family. But during that time, there was an underlying promise that there was more for her to achieve. A comeback after such a long gap almost meant she had to make a fresh start. But with a new partner, and especially with a title now under the belt, she’s managed to pick up the pieces very quickly.

“It’s always great to win a tournament, especially under the circumstances, it’s even better,” she says. “Playing for the first time, after



Sania Mirza lifted the WTA Hobart International trophy with partner Nadiia Kichenok after edging out Shuai Peng and Shuai Zhang in the final. *PTI*

almost two and a half years, post a baby, there’s a lot of things (happening). Probably we didn’t expect to win. We both just came in trying to get a feel of each other and our game, get some matches in and of course, we’re really excited to win.”

And in getting the win, the pair have broken the ice well and started the partnership on a strong note, especially with the Australian Open being the next port of call. Especially Mirza, who is probably still at a stage where she is regaining match sharpness, has gained the much-needed confidence with this win.

“I feel that, when I’m returning at my best, I feel very confident,” she says about the way she played in Hobart. “My return is my biggest strength, especially when I’m aggressive with it. That’s when I feel I’m at my best. I do miss some shots, but more often than not I make them.”

It’s with that aggressive playing style that she became a trailblazer for Indian women’s tennis. She was the first, and still is the only Indian woman to break into the top 100 and win a tour event, the only one to reach the top of the world rankings in doubles and win a

Grand Slam. And now that she’s back on tour, she’s looking to further inspire others.

“The part of the world that I come from, having a baby is like the end of the world,” she says. “The woman is just supposed to give up and take care of the child. I just feel that even if this inspires one woman to follow your dream and do something that she loves, I feel extremely privileged in this position.”

She now joins the elite club of tennis ‘Super Moms’ who are currently on tour, which includes the likes of Serena Williams, Victoria Azarenka, and very soon, four-time singles Grand Slam champion Kim Clijsters (who won three of her majors after becoming a mother).

The win in Hobart has given Mirza a shot in the arm, but her attention now turns toward the Australian Open. “We will not be seeded, to start with. There will be bigger teams there,” she adds. “Today we played against one of the best teams in the world, so this obviously shows that we are there, that we have the level to compete against them. Hopefully my calf is good and (Kichenok’s) hamstring is good. If we are in one piece, then we are good to go.”

Federer blasts lack of communication

Melbourne: Roger Federer demanded better communication about air quality at the Australian Open after smoke from bushfires hit the tournament’s build-up, as officials announced new guidelines on pollution. Federer, the 20-time Grand Slam champion, said a lack of information made matters worse for players who were forced to stay on the courts on Tuesday and Wednesday, when air quality in Melbourne was among the worst on the planet.

“I think communication is key from the tournament to the people, to the media, to the fans, to the players, because you do hear it’s not safe to be outside, keep your pets inside, close your windows,” Federer said. “You have court calls, then you look at the haze and everything, it doesn’t look good. How far are we from that threshold of playing, not playing?”

World number six Stefanos Tsitsipas was another player who was troubled by the smog, saying he had difficulty breathing even after practising indoors in Melbourne. “I was coughing a lot, had troubles breathing for a couple of hours,” Tsitsipas said Saturday, while Canadian young gun Denis Shapovalov claimed “I wouldn’t play” if conditions deteriorated during the tournament. “I’m 20 years old, I don’t want to risk my life, risk my health being out there playing in this condition,” he added. **AFP**

Tennis may be different since 2017, but Mirza is still the same.

Prajnesh in main draw

Prajnesh Gunnewaran on Saturday sneaked into the Australian Open men’s singles main draw as a lucky loser and may run into world number two Novak Djokovic if he clears the first hurdle. The Indian left-hander had lost the final qualifying round to Latvia’s Ernests Gulbis in straight sets but was fortunate to make the main draw as one of the direct entrants withdrew from the tournament. It will be Prajnesh’s fifth straight appearance in the main draw of a Grand Slam.

At Mumbai Marathon, Kipchoge shoes back in the spotlight

SHAHID JUDGE
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COSMAS LAGAT walked into the room sporting a flashy lime-green pair of shoes. It didn’t stand out from the rest of his peers, who make up the elite international contingent competing in the Mumbai Marathon on Sunday, but there was something distinctly familiar with the Kenyan’s chosen footwear. Soon enough, the question about the shoes did arise.

Last year, the 29-year-old recorded a time of 2:09:15 hrs to win the 42-km race in Mumbai, just short of the 2:08:35 record set in 2016. Surely these new shoes which resembled the famed Nike Vaporfly — a variant of which Eliud Kipchoge used to cover the distance of a marathon in under two hours — would help Lagat break the course record.

The runner took a few moments to consider the question, then said: “I’m hoping to do well, not the shoe.”

That’s been the common answer for athletes being questioned about the shoe that has been designed in such a way that it has been giving runners better timings. A shoe that is set to change the art of marathon running, a shoe that World Athletics is investigating to see if it should be made illegal.

According to Tim Hutchings, a former Great Britain middle-distance runner who is a regular marathon commentator, the shoe should be “outlawed.”

“It’s a technology that has lifted performances so dramatically that it has actually spoilt the sport of it. People are setting personal bests and breaking national records and breaking course records even setting world records,” Hutchings says. “People are running so fast at all levels. There are good club runners who are buying the shoes for \$250-300 and improving their personal bests by five minutes over a full marathon. It’s getting ridiculous.”

The shoes were first designed as a part of an attempt to enable an athlete to run the length of a marathon in under two hours — a feat that was seemingly impossible. And so with a modified prototype of the Vaporfly, and with all the elements kept in check on a flat and straight course in Vienna in October, Kipchoge clocked 1:59:40 hrs.

“If you look at the stats required, and break down the speed you have to move at over each

mile, it’s insanely quick. A lot of people say Eliud did it in Vienna, but he didn’t. He broke all the rules, and rules are there for a reason and they have been respected by generation after generation of runners, decade after decade,” Hutchings says. “What that group did in Vienna was great entertainment, but they cherry-picked the rules that didn’t suit them, and they picked other rules which did. So it’s an invalid run. It was not a marathon!”

Ripple effect

The record didn’t count. But it did help Brigid Kosgei break Paula Radcliffe’s 16-year women’s world record, when the Kenyan clocked 2:14:04 hrs at the Chicago Marathon (the previous record 2:15:25 was set at the London Marathon in 2003).

By then, the ability of the shoes to boost timings was clear and it created a ripple effect. All of a sudden there has been a sharp demand for the shoes, not just from amateur runners. Even the professionals are desperate for it.

“Apparently some East African athletes have been turning down contracts from other brands because they are so desperate to run in those Nike shoes. That’s how ridiculous it has gotten,” he adds.

“World Athletics have now said that they will look closely at this and that it may get banned. You have to draw the line somewhere. But they’ve possibly been guilty of turning their eye off the technicalities of the rules on equipment, because it’s been so many years that someone has come up with something like this.” The problem that arises with the shoes is that it provides an imbalance between the use of technology and actual talent.

“You’re not denigrating the athlete about how much hard work they’ve put in training, that’s not the point. All generations of athletes have worked very hard. We respect that. But they have to respect the fact that these shoes give them a huge advantage,” Hutchings adds. For now though, until World Athletics says otherwise, the shoes are legal and free to be used in competition. And so it’s up to Lagat to use it, bearing in mind he came within a minute close of breaking the course record in Mumbai last year.

Later on during the press meet, he makes it clear that at that point in time he wasn’t wearing the Vaporfly. But then he adds: “(On race day) yeah, I’ll use it.”

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