

A choke by any other name

Teen meltdown rocks Open's day of roses

PARIS

A single red rose was offered to every mademoiselle walking through the gates of Roland Garros on Thursday — but there was a decidedly unromantic feel to the tennis with emerging teenage star Nicole Pietrangeli choking horribly after coming so close to making her first grand slam final.

Instead of Pietrangeli, a 17-year-old Czech and the story of the women's tournament, advancing into tonight's title match against Belgian Justine Henin-Hardenne, the spectators on the Philippe Chatrier Court instead watched her fall away against Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova and then walk off all red-eyed and emotional.

Forget red roses and romance.

The first of the women's French Open semifinals was closer to being a horror show of a match.

It did not have to be that way, as Pietrangeli had had enough raw power in her forehand to work her way into a winning position against Kuznetsova, as she led by a set and 5-3.

But the world's 16th ranked player started to fret and think too much.

She flunked too many forehands, the errors started to flow and, from the brink of victory, Pietrangeli managed to conjure a heart-breaking 5-7 7-6 (7-5) 6-2 loss.

Pietrangeli, a blonde, tall and photogenic player on the verge of genuine, flashbulb tennis stardom, will have to wonder what might have been here in Paris.

And so Kuznetsova, the 2004 US Open champion, was all but handed on a platter her first grand slam final since that triumph in New York.

Henin-Hardenne, the defending champion, had a much simpler match after pulverising a disappointing Kim Clijsters for a 6-3 6-2 win in the all-

Belgian encounter. Henin-Hardenne's easy defeat of Clijsters, who was celebrating turning 23, meant she made the final without dropping a set.

Henin-Hardenne, also the 2003 champion here, will be the favourite for the final, having beaten Kuznetsova in 10 of their previous 11 meetings.

When Pietrangeli was serving for the match at 5-4 in the second set, she appeared to be thrown at 0-15 when she hit what she believed had been a forehand winner.

But the ball was then called out after the umpire checked the mark on the clay.

Pietrangeli was genuinely shocked by the call.

That point may well have been crucial, as Pietrangeli was broken to 15, though she did later edge back to be just two points short of victory, at 5-5 in the tie break, before committing two errors, the first with a forehand and the second with a backhand.

And even after trying to compose herself with a lengthy toilet break before the start of the third set, she could not keep it together in the decider.

Pietrangeli, who had never previously gone beyond the fourth round of a major, had defeated Mauresmo, the world No. 1, to reach the quarterfinals, and had followed that up by removing American Venus Williams.

The fortnight has confirmed that Pietrangeli is a chip off the old Eastern Bloc. She has taken the same route to tennis stardom as Russians Anna Kournikova and Maria Sharapova by moving from Eastern Europe to train at the Nick Bollettieri Academy in Florida.

Pietrangeli's time will come — probably when the rest of her game is as developed as her forehand.

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Belgian barrage: Justine Henin-Hardenne wasted no time dispatching compatriot Kim Clijsters. Picture: Getty Images

Federer through to final after injured Nalbandian retires

PARIS

World No. 1 Roger Federer has advanced to the final of the French Open for the first time after his semifinal opponent, Argentina's David Nalbandian, retired injured during the third set last night.

Federer was leading 3-6 6-4 5-2. It was an unsatisfactory end to the match but Federer reached some peak form in the second and third

sets to tone up for tomorrow's final. Victory tomorrow would give the Swiss master all four major crowns at the same time and put him half-way to the calendar year Grand Slam.

At 1-2 in the third set, Nalbandian called for the trainer and then a doctor, though no treatment was given.

In the next changeover, the trainer re-emerged and appeared to rub Nalbandian's stomach. Nalbandian missed a month of this season with an

abdominal injury. When play resumed, Nalbandian lost speed on his serve and had trouble moving.

Nalbandian called another medical timeout and told the umpire he could not continue. He had just lost serve to trail 5-2.

Earlier, the third seed had led by a set and 3-0 before Federer recovered.

Nalbandian, who has reached the semifinals at each of the grand slam

tournaments, broke Federer twice in the opening set and forced the top seed into 18 errors.

Nalbandian also led by a break at 3-0 in the second set before Federer broke at 3-1.

Federer produced the shot of the match at 3-3. He retrieved a lob and, with his back to Nalbandian, sliced a forehand down the line.

Federer made 15 winners and four unforced errors in the second set.

Federer and Nalbandian are now 6-6 in career meetings.

Federer plays defending champion Rafael Nadal or Croatian Ivan Ljubicic in tomorrow's final.

If he wins, Federer would become the first player since Rod Laver in 1969 to win four straight majors. He also would become the sixth player to win each of the grand slams and 11th first since Andre Agassi in 1999.

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