

Sampras struggles but wins in first round of French

By Steve Wilstein
The Associated Press

PARIS — For 4 hours and 18 minutes, Pete Sampras played as if he were trapped in a movie montage of his ugliest and longest matches.

He muttered and sputtered, letting his mind drift back to the way he survived so many other brutal five-setters. Matches when he was sick and cramped and barely able to stand, his racket serving as a crutch between points.

Then he won once again, shuffling away caked in red clay.

"It's 'Welcome to Paris,' I guess," Sampras said after taking his first-round match Tuesday against Juan Antonio Marin 6-7 (5-7), 6-4, 7-5, 7-6 (11-9), 6-4 at the French Open.

"How did I survive it? Grace of God, I guess," he said.

Sampras did everything he could to blow this match, including double-faulting on match point in the fourth-set tiebreaker, but then he did everything he could to win it on wobbly legs in the fifth.

"It was just pure will, just hanging in there and fighting hard," he said. "I wasn't going to stop, by any means. When it's in the fifth set, it comes down to heart and how much you want it."

Sampras wants to win his first French Open in the worst way,

and that's just how he started out. He was determined to play true to his own attacking style, but he found himself becoming tentative against the clay-loving Marin and too often got caught in the no-man's land between the baseline and the net.

Marin, a 5-foot-9 Costa Rican who had lost all seven of his previous Grand Slam matches and was ranked No. 92, displayed a knack for keeping the ball in play and frustrating Sampras. Never did that come in handier than when Sampras held the first of his two match points at 8-7 in the fourth-set tiebreaker.

Sampras drove a forehand crosscourt into the corner that looked like a solid winner to everyone except Marin.

"Pete thought I was not going to get to that ball," Marin said. "All the crowd also, because they shouted like the match was over. I got to that ball, and I run to the other side because I know I have to."

Surprised as Sampras was, he whacked another shot the other way, only to see Marin track that down, too, with what he called, with no exaggeration, "an unbelievable backhand" down the line that Sampras couldn't touch. Instead, Sampras lunged and tumbled to the court, lay sprawled for a long moment, then sat up with the back of his white shirt, shorts

and socks covered in red.

Marin raised his hands in triumph as the crowd roared, and he would have more reason to celebrate a few points later. Serving for the match at 9-8, Sampras double-faulted, then Marin swiped the set with the help of two big forehands.

Sampras wasn't too concerned about most of his 14 double-faults, though that one hurt.

"It depends on the time of the double-fault," he said. "Match point isn't recommended."

But when it came down to the fifth set, with the match already 3 1/2 hours old and evening shadows blanketing the court, Sampras had a familiar feeling. He'd been down this road many times, winning 26 of his 36 previous five-setters. He remembered digging out a match, even when he was sick and vomiting, against Alex Corretja in the 1996 U.S. Open. He remembered how he suffered with cramps but won three other five-setters at the French Open the same year.

He would just have to find a way to do it again.

"Sure, when you're in the fifth set you think of matches you played," he said. "You know how to conserve energy. When it's a big point, you push hard. If it's 40-love, there's no sense in killing yourself. Experience always

helps. The longer the match goes, the better I feel about my chances. You believe in yourself that you can kind of come through, and I did today."

As relieved as he was to win, Sampras knows that a five-setter to start off the tournament doesn't bode well for his chances to win the one major that has eluded him.

"It's never good to play 4 1/2 hours in the first round," he joked. "But I'm still alive."

The top women had a far easier time than Sampras. Steffi Graf, Monica Seles, Lindsay Davenport and Mary Pierce all advanced with no trouble. Also winning was Jennifer Capriati, just days after she won her first title in more than six years.

Graf, a five-time champion at the French, was making her 16th appearance at Roland Garros, where she hasn't lost before the quarterfinals in her last 12 tries. She skipped the French Open last year because of an injury.

After beating Magdalena Maleeva 6-2, 6-0, Graf said she isn't yet certain she can regain the form that brought her 21 career Grand Slam titles.

"I think I can, you know," she said. "I probably just need to believe in it a little more."

Seles, seeded third and a three-time winner at the French, won 6-2, 6-4 against Fang Li of China.

Asked about last year's loss in the final to Arantxa Sanchez Vicario, she said, "Thank goodness my memory is not long. That day was very difficult. I tried to learn from it."

Davenport, seeded second, made easy work of fellow American Jane Chi, winning 6-3, 6-1. Capriati also won easily with a 6-2, 6-3 victory over Virginia Ruano-Pascal of Spain. Anna Kournikova beat Tamarine Tanasugarn of Thailand 6-3, 6-3.

With an affectionate crowd behind him, former French Open champion Gustavo Kuerten powered his way into the second round with a straight-sets victory over Galo Blanco of Spain.

Kuerten has been having the best year on clay of anyone on the tour, and it showed in his methodical victory, with sharp groundstrokes punctuated by delicate drop shots.

"It couldn't have been better today," Kuerten said after his 6-4, 6-4, 6-3 win. "I played my best tennis, and everybody is treating me so well."

In other men's play, No. 3 Patrick Rafter beat Switzerland's Roger Federer 5-7, 6-3, 6-0, 6-2, while Aussie compatriot Mark Philippoussis lost to countryman Jason Stoltenberg 7-6 (7-4), 6-4, 6-1.

Nets reportedly pursuing Thompson

By Tom Canavan
The Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — While former Georgetown coach John Thompson is interested in the prospect of coaching in the NBA, the New Jersey Nets' interest in him caught him off guard.

During his daily radio program on Tuesday morning, Thompson said he has not spoken with the Nets about the job now being held by Don Casey on an interim basis nor does he have knowledge that his agent, David Falk, talked to the team about it.

The Record of Hackensack reported in its Tuesday editions that the Nets have talked with Thompson about coaching, and principal owner Lewis Katz is ready to confer with the former Georgetown coach's agent.

However, the newspaper said the Nets' No. 1 choice is Phil Jackson and they have offered the former Chicago Bulls coach what is described as one of the richest contracts in the history of

sports.

Thompson was not turned off by the Nets' interest.

"What I have found very interesting is that David Falk is talking to the New Jersey Nets for John Thompson. Well, I hope they send me a telegram and let me know of it. I'll take the job," he told listeners to his "Time Out with Thompson" show on WTEM.

Katz was to meet with Falk on Tuesday to discuss the kind of deal it would take to hire Thompson, the Record reported, using a source it described as close to the situation.

Nets spokesman John Mertz said the team would neither confirm nor deny that a meeting took place. "We are not going to discuss the names of any potential candidates," Mertz said. "Don Casey was announced as a candidate at the start of the search and he is the only candidate we will confirm."

A spokeswoman for Falk did

not address the Nets' coaching situation on Tuesday but said the agent has periodic discussions with team owners. Falk represents three of the Nets' best players — Stephon Marbury, Keith Van Horn and Kerry Kittles.

"He has had discussions with the Nets, and those discussions can and will remain private," said Alyson Sadofsky, Falk's director of public relations.

The Nets, who fired John Calipari in March after losing 17 of 20 games in this lockout-shortened season, are reportedly moving to the next level in their discussions with Thompson because ownership believes Jackson ultimately will end up with the New York Knicks or Los Angeles Lakers.

Thompson, 57, resigned from Georgetown on Jan. 8 after leading the Hoyas' program for 26 seasons. He cited personal reasons for leaving but added he was not retiring from coaching.

United, Bayern kick for soccer championship

By Nesha Starcevic
The Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain — Two of the biggest clubs in European soccer end their long waits Wednesday for another shot at the continent's most prestigious prize.

When Manchester United and Bayern Munich meet in the Champions Cup final at Camp Nou stadium, each will be chasing a rare triple — and the one victory it really wants.

"These are absolutely the two top teams in Europe right now," Bayern Munich midfielder Stefan Effenberg said. "But only if we win Wednesday can we call ourselves true champions."

Manchester United last won the cup in 1968, with a lineup that included George Best and Bobby Charlton. Charlton scored twice, Best and Brian Kidd added

one goal apiece and United beat Benfica Lisbon 4-1 in overtime.

Bayern's 1-0 win over St. Etienne in 1976 was its third Champions Cup win in a row and the last major trophy won by Franz Beckenbauer, Gerd Mueller & Co.

Neither club won its national title last season, but qualified for the expanded Champions League. If they were below par last season, the two European powers have been outstanding this year.

Both have won their league titles, and Manchester United added the Football Association Cup to move within one victory of becoming the first English club to win all three in the same season.

It also would be the first English club since Liverpool in 1984 to win the Champions Cup. English clubs were excluded from European cup tournaments after

deadly riots between Liverpool and Juventus fans at the 1985 cup final in Belgium.

"It's significant," Manchester manager Alex Ferguson said. "The English teams in the 1980s were fantastic and you could say they dominated the competition, really. I think we've progressed to that level and we're as good as any English team that has been here before. So that must give us a great chance to change the pattern."

Bayern is one step behind United in the triple crown chase — it still has to play the German Cup final June 12.

United has not lost in 32 games and is averaging 3.05 goals a game, getting sparkling play from star wingers David Beckham and Ryan Giggs and strikers Dwight Yorke and Andy Cole.

After early release, Tyson ready for ring

By Tim Dahlberg
The Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The news just keeps getting better for Mike Tyson.

A day after Tyson's early release from a Maryland jail, Nevada boxing officials indicated Tuesday they won't do anything to stand in the way of his return to the ring.

That could come as early as Aug. 21, with a possible fight in Las Vegas against the likes of Axel Schulz or Brian Nielsen.

"Aug. 21 is certainly a date we're looking at," said Jay Larkin, who runs boxing for the Showtime network. "Hopefully in the next couple of days we'll have something concrete."

Tyson's advisers and handlers, caught off-guard by his sudden release from jail Monday, were scrambling to make arrangements to get the fighter back in the ring as quickly as possible.

Those plans may have been made easier by indications that Nevada boxing officials won't use Tyson's no-contest plea that landed him in a Maryland jail against him or hold another hearing on his suitability to box in the state.

Tyson won a license in October after extensive hearings to replace the one taken from him for biting Evander Holyfield's ears.

"My feeling is that he has a license," said Dr. James Nave, vice chairman of the Nevada Athletic Commission. "I don't see the need for a hearing."

Tyson, whose last fight was a fifth round knockout of Francois Botha on Jan. 16, had his comeback interrupted when he was jailed in Maryland for assaulting two motorists following a traffic accident.

He served 3 1/2 months of a year-long sentence before being released on parole.

"We all agreed that while Mike Tyson was in jail, we wouldn't make any plans for his fights," Larkin said. "Now, he's been out only 24 hours and we just haven't gotten to that point yet. But we're going to start right now."

Adding to the sense of urgency to get Tyson back into the ring is the fact that his advisers want him to fight twice this year. And, because prime pay-per-view dates in September and November are already blocked out because of two big fights, the options for fight dates are limited.

Oscar De La Hoya and Felix Trinidad are expected to fight on pay-per-view on Sept. 18, while Holyfield and Lennox Lewis meet on Nov. 13 in their rematch on pay-per-view.

That leaves Tyson with the option of fighting in August and again in December. An alternative, though, could be for Tyson's fight to be a network show and not a pay-per-view, something his handlers are also reportedly considering.

The thinking behind putting a Tyson fight on Showtime itself or even selling it to a major network is that it would be tough to sell Tyson again in a fight against someone similar to Botha.

The 32-year-old Tyson looked rusty and confused in the ring against Botha in what was his first fight in 19 months since the Holyfield biting incident. Plans before he was sent to jail were for him to fight at least four times this year, and there is concern about what kind of boxing shape and condition he will be in.