



Asian Players in Australian Open Week One

Sometimes, leaving a Grand Slam tournament as a winner doesn't mean being the last player standing. There were many Asian players who made it to the Australian Open this year. Sometimes, leaving a Grand Slam tournament as a winner doesn't mean being the last player standing.

But 'triumph' is a relative term. Not every player dreams of their seven-match run to the title; for some, a first-round win can feel like lifting the trophy. Some want to prove a point, others to settle a score. And some capture our hearts and imaginations, enriching the memory of the season's first major for years to come.

Last weekend, 256 players were preparing for their Australian Open campaigns to start in earnest. Next weekend, two will be crowned champions. That's the harsh reality of Grand Slam tennis – 127 matches, one winner.



In a nation mad for tennis but deep in drought for a new homegrown star, fans sat up when Chinese player Zhang Shuai, ranked No. 133 in the world, on Tuesday knocked out World No. 2 Simona Halep 6-4, 6-3 from the first round of the Australian Open.

This is the first of 15 attempts that the Chinese player, who turns 27 on Thursday, has broken

through with a victory in the main singles draw in a Grand Slam, the highest level of tennis tournaments globally.

To think she might not have been in Melbourne. The Chinese 26-year-old had lost all 14 first-round matches she had played at the Grand Slams, dating back to her US Open debut in 2008, and contemplated retirement after losing during qualifying in New York last year. Resolving for one last shot, she invited her parents to watch her for the first time at the Melbourne. “I wanted them to see what the last 20 years were for,” the 26-year-old said later. “This is my life.”

After qualifying, Zhang drew world No.2 Simona Halep. At least that guaranteed a show court – but Zhang had other ideas, playing the match of her life to clinch a showstopping 6-4 6-3 victory, bursting into tears during the on-court interview as the gravity of her achievement sunk in.

And then, she did it again, upsetting Alize Cornet in the second round before pushing past American Varvara Lepchenko in the third. A truly inspiring tale.

“To play against the great player, I’m feeling no more nervous, you know, because nothing to lose,” she said. “So I play like 100 percent good.”



As the applause went up, the tears welled up in Zhang’s eyes. She covered her face, drenched in tears when she lifted it some seconds later to address the crowd. “I think in my life, it’s the best tennis,” Zhang said.

Apart from thanking her coach and parents, Zhang also

paid homage to China’s tennis great Li Na. Li, a two-time Grand Slam winner who retired from tennis in September 2014 due to injuries, has been a spectral – and sometimes quite real, as she still shows up at tournaments – presence for Chinese players on the global circuit even now.

No Chinese player has come close to matching Li's long shadow either in professional accomplishment or the millions of dollars she was able to secure in endorsements as the face of Asian tennis.

Zhang paid tribute to Li on Tuesday, as has become a rite of passage for all aspiring Chinese players.

"Li Na gave me a lot of help," Zhang said. "She's always helping the young players."

She added that the victory felt like a "dream coming true."



Meanwhile Nishikori too strong for Tsonga

The 25-year-old Nishikori avenged a five-set Roland Garros defeat to Tsonga with a straight-sets thumping of the Frenchman in the fourth round under the roof at a packed Hisense Arena.



He was rarely hassled by the 30-year-old Tsonga, posting a 6-4 6-2 6-4 result to reach the quarterfinals for the third time.

Tsonga had won the pair's most recent outing, the aforementioned quarterfinal stoush at last year's French Open and was bidding to reach the quarterfinals at Melbourne Park for the fifth time.

The only Asian male player left in the Tournament Nishikori brought up three match points when Tsonga netted an attempt at a forehand pass and booked his place in the quarterfinals on his third chance when the Frenchman sprayed an off-forehand wide.

"I'm surprised that I broke him early every set. I was returning well today, so that makes it I think tough for him to have a good serve all the time," Nishikori said.

"Seems like he doesn't have many first serves in today. I think today was very good tactics for me. I played very patient.

"When I have an opportunity, you know, I tried to come in sometimes. Using my forehands more and very aggressive at certain moments. Yeah, I felt like everything was working well today."

Daring not to think of the grand prize at stake should he reach a second major final, Nishikori was not looking beyond his next match against either world No.1 and five-time champion Novak Djokovic or French No.14 seed Gilles Simon.

"Yeah, I try to take it one match at a time. I don't even know what round it is now," he grinned.

Should it be Djokovic in the quarterfinals, the seventh seed would have to upset the Serb for the first time since the 2014 US Open semifinals.

"I think the biggest thing is he doesn't miss, you know. He doesn't give you easy points, any free points. I have to, you know, be the one to dictate."