

Halep remains on course to defend title

Murray bows out as Djokovic marches on in Madrid

MADRID, May 11, (AFP): World number one Andy Murray's slump in form continued as he crashed out of the Madrid Masters third round 6-3, 6-3 to lucky loser Borna Coric on Thursday.

Defending champion Novak Djokovic did ease into the quarter-finals, though, with a 6-4, 7-5 win over Feliciano Lopez.

Coric was only handed a late reprieve to enter the draw in Madrid after losing in qualifying to Mikhail Kukushkin.

However, Murray cut a frustrated figure as he was swept aside by 20-year-old Croatian for the second time in the pair's four meetings.

Coric broke the fragile Murray serve three times in the first set under the roof at the Manolo Santana centre court due to rain in the Spanish capital.

And one poor service game from the Wimbledon champion cost him dear in the second as Coric served out for the match to set up a quarter-final meeting with Grigor Dimitrov or Dominic Thiem.

Djokovic has had his own strug-

gles of late.

The Serb parted ways with his coaching staff of 10 years last week after also suffering early exits at the Australian Open and Monte Carlo Masters.

However, he believes he is making slow but steady progress after seeing off Lopez and a partisan crowd to reach the last eight.

"If you're playing against a Spanish player in Madrid, it's obviously a different game, it's a different feeling," said Djokovic.

"They have a lot of support. You need to kind of hold your nerve, hold your concentration, and use all the necessary energy at the right moments."

Djokovic was dominant on serve throughout, facing only one break point in the opening game of the second set.

And the 12-time Grand Slam champion applied just enough pressure at the right time to break Lopez's serve in the final game of both sets.

Djokovic faces a much tougher test on Friday against world num-



Novak Djokovic from Serbia returns the ball to Feliciano Lopez during a Madrid Open tennis tournament match in Madrid, Spain on May 11. (AP)

ber eight Kei Nishikori, who earlier swept aside David Ferrer 6-4, 6-3.

However, Nishikori has only

won two of their previous 13 meetings.

"Novak is someone that I don't have good record (against)," said

the Japanese.

"I got to stay really positive and I got to play great tennis to beat him. I try to enjoy my big challenge tomorrow."

Rafael Nadal's quest for a third straight title after wins in Monte Carlo and Barcelona faces a stiff test against Nick Kyrgios in the night session.

David Goffin awaits the winner of that clash after the Belgian beat world number six Milos Raonic 6-4, 6-2.

Twenty-year-old German Alexander Zverev continued his fine form after claiming his second title of the year in Munich last week as he ousted 11th seed Tomas Berdych 6-4, 6-4.

In the women's Madrid Open, third seed Simona Halep remains on course to defend her title as she thrashed American Coco Vandeweghe 6-1, 6-1.

Halep faces Latvian Anastasija Sevastova in Friday's semi-finals after the world number 22 saw off Kiki Bertens 6-3, 6-3.

France's Kristina Mladenovic also reached the last four in straight

sets 6-4, 6-4 over Sorana Cristea.

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Roger Federer is set to make his 15th appearance at Halle's ATP tournament next month in his bid to win the title for the ninth time, organisers said Thursday.

The 18-time Grand Slam winner, currently ranked fourth in the world, has confirmed he will play at the grass-court tournament from June 17-25 — traditionally a warm-up for Wimbledon, which starts on July 3.

It will be the 15th-time Swiss tennis legend Federer, 36, has played in Halle which he won for the eighth time in 2015.

"We are looking forward to Roger's return," said tournament director Ralf Weber.

"He has finally helped bring the tournament into a new dimension and made it even more popular worldwide." Along with Federer, eight of the top 20 in the world will be in Halle including last year's beaten finalist Alexander Zverev, 20, who won the Munich clay-court ATP tournament last Sunday.



Croatian tennis player Borna Coric returns a ball to British player Andy Murray at the ATP Madrid Open in Madrid on May 11. (AFP)

Liverpool not selling Coutinho: Klopp

LONDON, May 11, (RTRS): Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp has quashed speculation linking midfielder Philippe Coutinho with a move to Barcelona in the summer, highlighting the fact the player had put pen to paper on a contract extension until 2020 in January.

"When did he sign his new contract?" Klopp told British media. "There are absolutely no plans (to sell)."

"What our owners say is there is the

absolute opportunity not to sell anybody if we do not want to. That means we can bring in other players and it is a good situation. We have a stable squad with a good basis.

"We want to bring a few in with fresh blood, but nobody will leave us without our say so I am completely relaxed about this."

Liverpool are third in the league on 70 points with two games left. They will secure a top-four spot if they win

both their remaining games but have no room for error with Manchester City (69 points) and Arsenal (66 points) hot on their heels each with a game in hand.

Injured forward Sadio Mane was confident Liverpool would secure a spot in next season's Champions League. "It's frustrating being out and having to watch, but my team mates are still doing a great job on the pitch," he added.

Koeman issues contract ultimatum to Barkley

World Cup fans to get 'hospitable' welcome in Russia

MANAMA, May 11, (Agencies): Football fans heading to next year's World Cup in Russia will receive a "hospitable" welcome, the head of the body organising the tournament told the annual FIFA Congress in Bahrain on Thursday.

Shrugging off fears of potential hooliganism surrounding the tournament, Alexei Sorokin insisted the event would be a success.

Concerns have been raised following violent clashes between Russian and English fans in Marseille during last summer's European Championships.

A BBC documentary broadcast in February claimed Russian hooligans would target fans in a "festival of violence" next year.

The claims were dismissed as "propaganda" by the head of the Russian Football Federation, Vladimir Markin.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino has said he has no fears about violence at the tournament.

Sorokin added that "preparations are at full speed and we have no doubt all the work will be done on time".

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Everton midfielder Ross Barkley has been handed an ultimatum by manager Ronald Koeman, who says he will be put up for sale unless he agrees a new contract by next weekend.

The 23-year-old England international has been linked with moves away from Goodison Park and Koeman appears to have run out of patience with the speculation.

"But if you need so much time then you have doubts - I like to work with players who like to stay."

Tottenham Hotspur are one of the clubs being linked with Barkley, who has one year left on his contract.

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Valencia on Thursday named former Villarreal manager Marcelino as coach for next season, as the fallen giants of La Liga plot a revival in fortunes after two disappointing seasons and a slew of managers.

Marcelino took Villarreal from Spain's second tier to three consecutive top-six finishes and the semifinals of last season's Europa League. He was dismissed at the start of this campaign due to differences with the board of directors.

Marcelino has been out of work since, with league rules preventing a coach from working for two different top-flight clubs in the same season.

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Former Argentina coach Edgardo Bauza has taken on the challenge of trying to qualify the United Arab Emirates for the 2018 World Cup, it was announced on Thursday.

The 59-year-old oversaw eight World Cup qualifying games for Argentina but was fired last month with the nation fifth in their group, and has now signed a two-year deal to coach in the Middle East.

Bauza won the Copa Libertadores with Quito in 2008 and Argentina's San Lorenzo in 2014, and is the man who persuaded Lionel Messi to come out of international retirement.

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The Football Association (FA) has banned several mem-

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bers of the England Supporters Travel Club as part of an investigation into the fans' inappropriate conduct during the March 22 friendly against Germany at Dortmund. The FA along with the UK Football Policing Unit are investigating England supporters after they sang songs about World War II and booed the German national anthem during the friendly.

"Firstly, we would like to thank all England Supporters Travel Club members who have taken the time to make contact to express their disappointment and dismay at what they witnessed in Dortmund..." the organisation said in a statement.

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Newcastle United manager Rafael Benitez will have access to "every last penny" generated by the club in their Championship winning season to strengthen his squad for next season's Premier League, owner Mike Ashley has promised.

Newcastle will require significant spending on transfers and equipments to thrive in the league and Benitez had previously expressed his frustration at the club's lack of new signings in the January transfer window.

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