

Rome preview



All eyes will be on Serena Williams after the world No.6 eased to victory in Madrid

The last big clay court tournament before Roland Garros begins on Monday, so here's a quick preview of the week ahead....

It'll be in with the red and out with the blue on Monday as the tennis calendar moves closer to its second slam of the year with the International BNL d'Italia – a combined event in Rome. The third of three ATP Masters 1000 events contested on clay and just as significant for the women, the tournament offers vital preparation for the French Open, which kicks off two weeks later on May 27.

Novak Djokovic reigned supreme in Rome last year, continuing his unbroken run with a fourth successive victory over Rafael Nadal in an ATP World Tour Masters 1000 event, while Maria Sharapova dismissed her previous issues on clay to defeat the 2010 French Open finalist, Sam Stosur, for victory at the Foro Italico.

ATP clay form book

Defending champion Djokovic hasn't had the best start of starts to his clay campaign, losing a one-sided Monte Carlo final to Nadal four days after learning of the passing of his grandfather. Both Djokovic and Nadal have been critical of the blue surface in Madrid and will no doubt be looking forward to the normality of red.

Nadal and his knees look in good form and the Spaniard remains undefeated on the dirt in 2012 after securing his eighth win at the Monte Carlo Country Club before winning a tougher battle against compatriot David Ferrer in the Barcelona.

The remainder of the top four will be keen to impress in Rome, with new world No.2 Roger Federer set for his second clay tournament of the year after impressing in Madrid, and Andy Murray looking to better his quarter-final runs in Monte Carlo and Barcelona after skipping Madrid with a back injury.

WTA clay form book

It has the makings of a great potential Trivial Pursuit question: When did Maria Sharapova, suddenly finding her feet on clay, once describe herself as a "cow on ice"? (For answer, see below)

Sharapova's movement has improved enough over the years since that comment to net her the Stuttgart title, on clay, in April, and the two-time French Open semi-finalist should not be dismissed as any kind of sporting bovine. Victoria Azarenka had a dream start to 2012, winning her maiden Slam in Melbourne. Her clay season has resulted in a final at Stuttgart and a shoulder-bumping new rivalry on the women's tour, after she refused to duck out of Sharapova's path in April.

But all eyes will be on Serena Williams after the world No.6 eased to victory in Madrid. The American is undefeated on clay this year, however, her opponents will take some comfort in the fact that she hasn't won a title on the red version of the dirt since her French Open triumph in 2002.

Remarkably, all six of Agnieszka Radwanska's defeats this year have come to the world No.1. She could be on quite a streak were it not for the Belarusian, and after making the semis in Stuttgart, the Pole will be looking to better her 2009 quarter-final showing in Rome, where she fell 6-1 6-2 to Venus Williams.

*Answer: Maria Sharapova def Jill Craybas, RG 2007 R2, 6-2 6-1

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