

# The Big Plays on Clay

By Beth Rifkin



Nadal



Henin

The 2010 clay-court season, leading up to the French Open, brought world records, emotional returns and career breakthroughs.

## Men: Vamos Rafa!

For Rafael Nadal the 2010 men's clay court season marked a historic point in his career and set the bar at an unprecedented high level for the men's pro tour. Returning to his favorite surface for the first time since suffering a disappointing loss at the 2009 French Open, Nadal systematically confirmed that his "ailing knees" were no longer an issue as he relentlessly pummeled opponent after opponent, proving once again that he is indeed the King of Clay.

Each ATP Tour Masters 1000 event in the season marked a monumental win for the Spaniard and set a path for him to regain the World No. 1 ranking. At the **Monte Carlo Rolex Masters** Nadal defeated compatriot

Fernando Verdasco 6-0, 6-1 to win his first title in almost a year and become the first player in the Open era to win a tournament for six straight years.

At the **Internazionali BNL d'Italia** in Rome, Nadal equaled Andre Agassi's record of 17 ATP World Tour Masters 1000 titles with a win over fellow Spaniard David Ferrer, 7-5, 6-2. Nadal broke that record the following week in Madrid at the **Mutua Madrileña Madrid Open** when at 23 years and 11 months he won a record-breaking 18th ATP World Tour Masters 1000 title as he defeated rival Roger Federer 6-4, 7-6(5), in their first match-up in a year.

Nadal wasn't the only one making breakthroughs on clay this year.

The season opened in **Casablanca** where Swiss Stanislas Wawrinka won the second title of his career by defeating third-seed Victor Hanescu 6-2, 6-3. "I've lost five finals in a row and now finally I have the trophy in my hands," said Wawrinka.

In **Houston**, Juan Ignacio Chela of Argentina ended his title drought at the only ATP World Tour event in the U.S. contested on clay, defeating third-seed American Sam Querrey 5-7, 6-4, 6-3. Fernando Verdasco became the eighth successive Spanish winner at the **Barcelona Open BancSabadell**, defeating Robin Soderling 6-3, 4-6, 6-3. "I've always dreamed of winning the title here," said Verdasco.

The third time was a charm for Russian Mikhail Youzhny at the **BMW Open** in Munich, after ending as runner-up in 2007 and 2009, the championship trophy—and a new BMW 325i convertible—was finally his when he defeated top



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wasn't there anymore before. It has been a lot of work but I'm ready for it. It's great to be back and share these emotions with all of you guys. I had a fantastic week. Everything was perfect." Henin defeated Australia's Samantha Stosur, 6-4, 2-6, 6-1, ending Stosur's 11-match winning streak.

The women's clay season opened in Marbella, Spain, at the **Andalucia Tennis Exerience**, where Italy's Flavia Pennetta reached the final without dropping a set and went on to earn her ninth WTA title, seven of which came on clay, defeating Spaniard Carla Suarez Navarro 6-2, 4-6, 6-3. "I just got the better of her at the end," Pennetta said.

Stateside in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., at the **MPS Group Championships**, World No. 3 Caroline Wozniacki won the title for the second year in a row, defeating Belarusian Olga Govortsova 6-5, 7-5, to even out her lifetime finals record to 7-7. Wozniacki said, "I love playing here. I've won 10

matches in a row here, I'm so happy to win this title again."

On her way to her first French Open final Stosur stopped in Charleston, S.C., for the **Family Circle Cup**, where she defeated Vera Zvonareva, 6-0, 6-3, for her second WTA Tour singles title. Stosur's finals opponent in Paris—and the 2010 French Open champion—Francesca Schiavonne began her



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collection of clay-court trophies in Spain at the **Barcelona Ladies Open**, beating Roberta Vinci in just 59 minutes, 6-1, 6-1.

In Morocco, Iveta Benesova defeated Simona Halep for her second career singles title. Maria Jose Martinez Sanchez beat Jelena Jankovic, 7-6, 7-5, for the title in Rome at the **Internazionali BNL d'Italia**. And decked out in gold lame, France's Aravane Rezai defeated World No. 2 Venus Williams for the biggest WTA Tour title in her career in Madrid at the **Mutua Madrilenia Madrid Open**, 6-2, 7-5. Said Rezai of the win, "I'm very proud of myself. It was a tough

tournament—everyone was here—but I believed in myself. It's the best week of my career."

Romanian Alexandra Dulgheru won her second career title at the **Polstat Warsaw Open** in Poland, defeating No.5 seed Zheng Jie in the final, 6-3 6-4. And Maria Sharapova executed her power game for her 22nd career title after a two-month layoff with a right elbow injury, overpowering first-time finalist Kristina Barrois of Germany, 7-5, 6-1 at the **Internationaux de Strasbourg** in France. This was only Sharapova's second career title on clay. ☺

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seed Marin Cilic 6-3, 4-6, 6-4. Belgrade was treated to an all-American final at the **Serbia Open**, where Sam Querrey became the first American since 2003 to win a European clay-court title in singles, defeating friend John Isner 3-6, 7-6(4), 6-4.

Spaniard Albert Montanes became the first man to win back-to-back titles at the **Estoril Open** in Portugal, in a surprise win over World No. 1 Roger Federer 6-2, 7-6(5). France's Richard Gasquet ended his title drought with a win over World No. 9 Verdasco 6-3, 5-7, 7-6(5) in Nice. And Argentina captured its fourth **ARAG ATP World Team Championship**, with a win over the USA in Dusseldorf.

American doubles team Bob and Mike Bryan proved that Americans have moves on clay with wins in Houston, Rome and Madrid, the latter of which gave them a record-equaling 61st doubles title, tying the legendary doubles team of Todd Woodbridge and Mark Woodforde.

**Women: Allez Justine!**

"I never thought I'd be back in Stuttgart a year ago. And especially for it to be on clay now, it means a lot to me," said four-time French Open champion Justine Henin after winning her fifth title at the **Porsche Tennis Grand Prix** in Stuttgart, Germany, and her first since coming out of retirement. "When I saw Roger Federer winning the French Open... it brought back the fire that

