Iga Swiatek: Clay queen targets Olympic gold

AFP- Iga Swiatek is returning to a happy hunting ground as she seeks a first Olympic crown to add to her four French Open titles at Roland Garros.

The Polish world number one has been dominant on the red clay of Paris, winning four of the past five tournaments and is unbeaten there since a quarter-final loss to Greece's Maria Sakkari in 2021.

The five-time Grand Slam champion, who won the US Open in 2022, is seeking to go much further than she did at the Tokyo Games in 2021, where she lost to Paula Badosa in the second round.

Swiatek, 23, has had plenty of time to prepare for the Paris Olympics after her early exit from Wimbledon, where she lost in the third round to Yulia Putintseva.

The painful defeat on the grass at the All England Club brought Swiatek's 21-match winning streak to a shuddering halt.

She was asked afterwards how she would prepare for the Olympics in Paris.

"For sure I'm going to take a lesson and rest a bit more," she said. "I don't know, I feel like even though I didn't perform well at this tournament, because of how the whole season is looking, I deserve it.

"I should literally do it better because I'm not going to be able to go through the whole season playing good tennis."

– French Open breakthrough –

In 2020, Swiatek announced herself to the tennis world when she won the French Open without dropping a set.

She was the first Polish player, male or female, to win a Grand Slam singles title and has dominated the event since, with her one blip coming three years ago.

Last month she beat Italy's Jasmine Paolini in a one-sided final, becoming the fourth woman in the modern era to lift the Coupe Suzanne Lenglen four times after Justine Henin, Chris Evert and Steffi Graf.

The world number one also completed a Madrid-Rome-Roland Garros clay treble. The only other woman in history to do it in the same season is Serena Williams.

Swiatek has sporting pedigree – her father Tomasz represented Poland in rowing at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul.

"Normally a small child has trouble hitting even one or two balls but she could keep it going for dozens of shots," recalls Artur Szostaczko, her first coach.

"She was a fighter…. I knew that if it went to a super tie-break, there was no need to worry – Iga wouldn't crack under the pressure."

Szostaczko taught Swiatek until she was 10 years old.

She was then coached by Michal Kaznowski, who remembers that Swiatek always wanted to be treated on an equal footing with her hard-working big sister Agata.

"Iga got really mad at me because I proposed some basic drill where I would feed Agata eight balls but only six to Iga because she was younger," he said

"That made her angry. She went to her dad and said she wants just as many as Agata."

Swiatek will hope that determination carries her all the way to the gold medal on her favourite courts in Paris.

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