

Life just grand with monkey off my back

Picture: AFP

WORLD NO.1 AND FRENCH OPEN CHAMPION SIMONA HALEP IS PRIMED TO BE A FORCE AT THE AUSTRALIAN OPEN, WRITES **EMILY BENAMMAR**

Emily Benammar: What effect (if any) did breaking your grand slam title drought have on your approach/outlook to tennis?
Simona Halep: It was huge for me. I had been so close three times and had to pick myself up mentally after those tough losses. Everything for me was about keeping a positive mindset and reminding myself that the hard work would pay off eventually. When I won at Roland Garros and lifted the trophy it was one of the greatest feelings I have ever had in my life. It confirmed everything I have believed in and validated all of my hard work. The tough times I had getting there made victory taste all the sweeter.

EB: Being named 2018 player of the year/ITF world champion: Does this pile on the pressure for 2019?
SH: No, I don't think it piles on pressure at all. It is a reflection of the year I had – winning my first grand slam and finishing the year as No.1 in the world. Doing that for the second year in a row is something I am really proud of as it's never easy to back up a great achievement. I am really proud of everything I did in 2018 and it just gives me extra motivation going into 2019.

EB: How do you handle pressure?
SH: I'm really proud of how I handled the pressure of being No.1 in 2018. When you have a target on your back it's not easy because everyone wants to play their best against you and beat you. But being No.1 is something you should embrace and be proud of. I try to carry it as a privilege rather than a burden and use it as motivation to make me an even better player.

EB: What steps will you be taking to replace Darren Cahill or will you remain coachless?
SH: I am going to Australia with a hitting partner and have also been

getting help from our Romanian Fed Cup captain through the off-season. I am happy with this set-up for now and didn't want to go straight into hiring another full-time coach.
EB: Do the ITF and WTA need to do more to promote all players? Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova seem to be favoured by some tournaments. Should this be balanced by the governing bodies?
SH: I think this is an old perception. I think the WTA did a great job with its marketing shoot in Indian Wells this year and photographed more players than it has ever done before. It also had a great pre-Wimbledon

recognition this year. I am very proud to have been named the WTA player of the year, the ITF World Champion, the Romanian player of the year, to have won the fan favourite of the year and the WTA shot of the year. But for me it is not about my achievements being recognised by other people, it's that I have the Roland Garros trophy in my cabinet, that I finished the year No.1 in the world and that I made huge strides in maintaining a positive mindset on the court.

EB: You have enjoyed a lot of success in Australia. Does it feel like a second home to you?

SH: I love playing in Australia. I had some brilliant matches there last year and I will remember it as winning some huge battles in tough circumstances. I always get great support in Australia from Romanian fans and I'm really looking forward to being back there.

EB: How do you prepare for the extreme heat here? You seem to handle it better than some of your colleagues.
SH: I enjoy playing in the heat. Physical fitness is a huge part of my game, a great strength for me and something I work very hard on. I think when you have won some really long matches in the heat, it helps psychologically that you know you can do it. Plus with experience you know what you need to do to recover properly and take care of your body.

EB: You joined the elite list of athletes working with Nike after playing sponsorless at the Australian Open in 2018. How much has your position in the tennis world changed in the past 12 months?

SH: I am loving being a Nike athlete and really enjoying representing a brand that I have always admired. They have been great to work with.



party where it promoted that campaign and the new faces we have. We have lots of great young stars coming through. Look at Naomi Osaka in the final of the US Open, plus talented players like Kasatkina and Sabalenka, so I think we should be proud of our sport. We let our tennis do the talking and the rest takes care of itself.

EB: As the No.1-ranked female player in the world, do you think you get the recognition you deserve?
SH: I think I have had lots of

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Osaka arrives unfashionably early in bid for back-to-back slams

PAUL MALONE

FOLLOWING her surprising and controversial win over Serena Williams in the US Open final, Naomi Osaka is leaving no stone unturned to make it back-to-back grand slam titles.

The young Japanese star will

be the first overseas seed to arrive for the Brisbane International when her flight from Los Angeles lands this morning.

She is expected to practise later today at the Queensland Tennis Centre.

Florida-based Osaka will be seeded second for the Brisbane

International, which starts on Monday, third seed for the Sydney International and one of the leading contenders for the Australian Open crown next month.

What should have been the 21-year-old's greatest occasion on a tennis court was overshadowed by Williams' monumental

tantrum during their US Open decider. A tearful Osaka won admirers not only for the way she handled Williams' outburst but because she had taken down one of the greats of the game to become the first Japanese player to win a grand slam title.

The Brisbane International

has attracted eight players who are ranked in the world's top 12, including 2017 US Open champion Sloane Stephens and dual Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova, as well as two of the "big four" of men's tennis, Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray.

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Naomi Osaka.

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