



# Paris love after it

Roland Garros was the perfect stage for Simona Halep's long-awaited Grand Slam breakthrough

Interview PAUL NEWMAN



**'I was always happy with the way I practised, but I would say to myself: OK, is the big day going to happen or not?'**

The crowd at the French Open can be unforgiving. Serena Williams was reduced to tears by the boos of spectators on one occasion. Maria

Sharapova has been felled off court at the end of a match and Tom Nadal once called the Paris fans "stupid" after they gave his nephew Rafael a hard time.

While support for home players is usually wholehearted – though even that is by no means guaranteed – it takes a special overseas competitor to win over the Roland Garros public. The affection for one such player was evident this summer as Simona Halep was at last crowned a Grand Slam champion.

There were plenty of Romanian flags in the crowd as Halep took on Shane Stephens in her third final in Court Philippe Charrier on a hot and humid Saturday in June, but the support for her came from more than just her compatriots. The fact that a European was taking on an American might have played a part in the crowd's allegiances, but there was also personal affection for a player whose warm smile, generous nature and honest endeavour – not to mention her clear love of the tournament and the city – has endeared her to Parisians. The chants of "Simona! Simona!" grew increasingly loud as Halep closed in on a victory which was all the sweeter given her heart-breaking defeats in the French Open finals of 2014 and 2017. On the first occasion Halep had lost to Sharapova after a gruelling contest that lasted more than three hours and on the second she led Jelena Ostapenko by a set and 3-0 before the fearless Latvian staged a stunning fightback.

Even more disappointment had followed for Halep at the start of this year when she lost in the final of the

Australian Open to Caroline Wozniacki in a showdown between current and former world No. 1s who were both striving to win their first Grand Slam title.

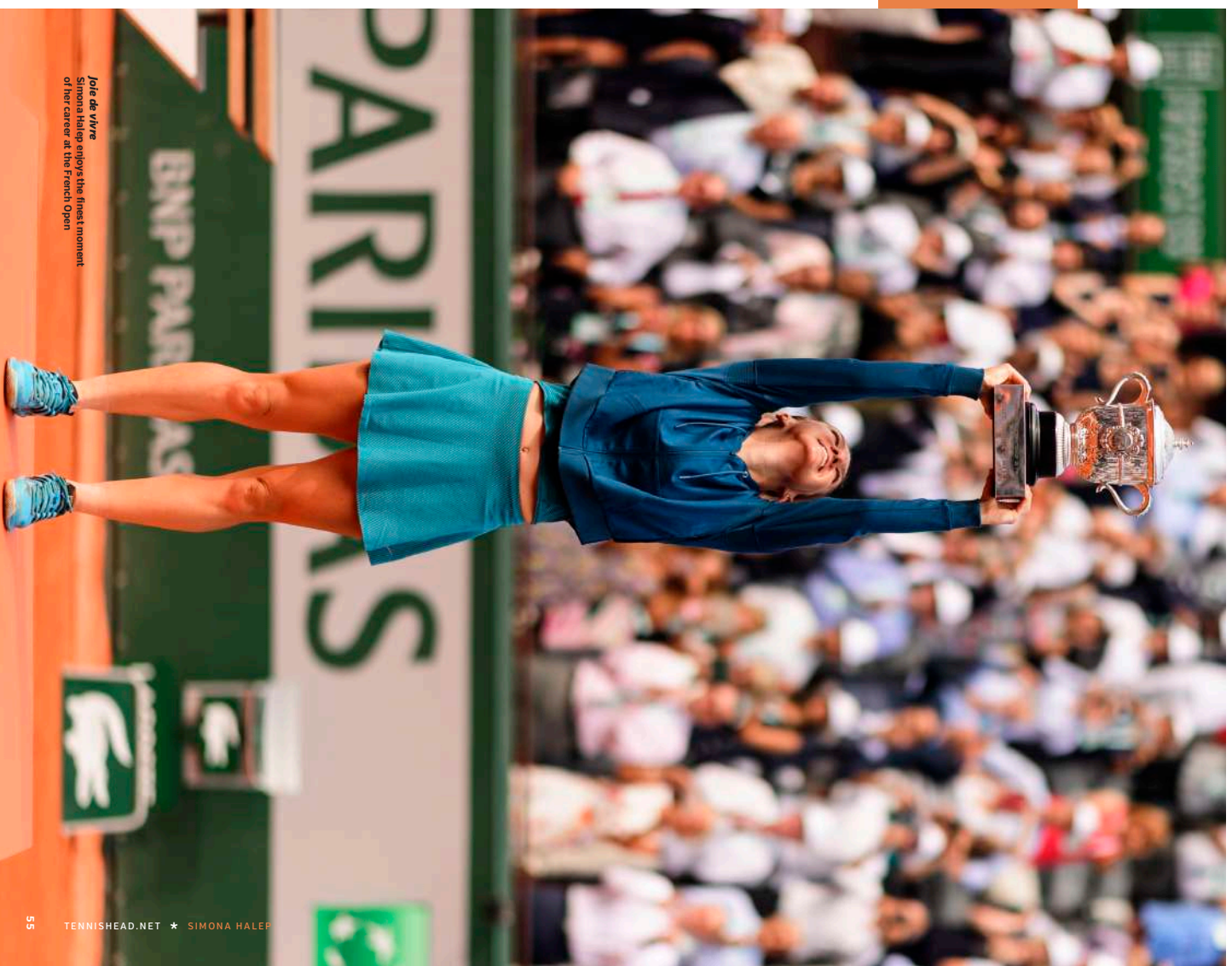
As this year's French Open approached, Halep admits that she had started to wonder whether she would ever achieve the biggest goal of her career. "I would think about it after a tough day on the practice court," she told tennishead. "I was always happy with the way I practised, but I would say to myself: OK, is the big day going to happen or not? I always had this question in my head. It wasn't especially negative, but it was a kind of pressure."

Had the fact that she was constantly being asked about her failure to win a Grand Slam title increased that pressure? "Definitely. Every time when I started a press conference the question was there, 'If I believed I could win a Grand Slam, how that it's over? I feel more relaxed,'" Roger Federer once talked about "partying like rock stars" after winning a Grand Slam title, but Halep's celebrations after her triumph in Paris this summer were comparatively modest.

"I was incredibly happy but I'd worked really hard for that trophy and I was very tired," she said. "I went to a restaurant with about 50 people – friends who had been there for the match, my team, my family. They all came. We celebrated until I am and then I went back to the hotel and I slept with the trophy. That was my celebration."

"I slept for about five or six hours, so not much. The next day I had to pose for pictures with the trophy so I went to the city to buy a dress and get ready."

Halep's physical exertions in the first half of her 2018 campaign were remarkable. Between starting her season in the first week of January and winning the



**Joye de vivre**  
Simona Halep enjoys the finest moment of her career at the French Open

**Silverware on show**  
Caroline Wozniacki (left) and Simona Halep with their trophies after the Australian Open final



## 'Always in my life it's been about the journey not being easy'

French Open she played 41 matches and reached the quarter-finals or better of every tournament she played other than the Miami Open.

Having kicked off her season by winning the title in Shenzhen, she did not suffer her first defeat until her 12th match of the year, which was the momentous final against Wozniacki at the Australian Open.

The Melbourne final was played in punishing heat and humidity and a fever returning to her hotel Halep went to hospital suffering from dehydration. "I had tried to sleep, but my body had started to shake a little bit with cramps and I needed some help," she recalled. "I was in hospital for three or four hours."

In her distress that night, had she been thinking that she might never win a Grand Slam title? "I was not that negative to be honest," Halep said. "I felt like that match was the closest I had come to winning a Grand Slam title. I had played very well. I felt that the match had been decided by just a few balls. But after I recovered I honestly felt confidence that it was going to happen one day."

Halep went on to reach the semi-finals in Doha and Indian Wells and was runner-up in Rome. Given her demanding schedule, it was no surprise after Roland Garros that she did not play any warm-up tournaments on grass before Wimbledon. Instead she spent time at home with family and friends in Bucharest and her

home city of Constanta. "I didn't go out too much because it was a little bit crazy in Romania after winning a Grand Slam," she said. "I just tried to get my energy back."

At Wimbledon Halep admitted after her third-round loss to Su-Wei Hsieh that she still felt exhausted. "It was a mental and emotional thing," she recalled. "I was tired and I couldn't focus on what I had to do during the matches."

"I practised well before that, but in practice you don't feel pressure. You don't feel any emotions. But when I started the tournament I felt exhausted. As soon as I stepped on the court to play a match I felt tired."

After Wimbledon Halep took three weeks off and went on holiday to the Bahamas, though she admitted that she found it hard to keep her mind off tennis. "I'm thinking about the next tournaments, so I try to stay professional," she said.

On her return to competition Halep won the title in Montreal and was runner-up in Cincinnati, where her semi-final victory over Aryna Sabalenka proved to be her last win of the year. Kaja Kanepi shocked her in the

first round of the US Open and she lost first time out in the only other tournaments she played, in Wuhuan and Beijing, where she retired with a back problem after losing the first set to Ons Jabeur.

The back issue also kept Halep out of the WTA Finals in Singapore, though her strong performances in the first eight months of 2018 meant that her place at the top of the year-end world rankings was secure.

A potentially even greater blow came after the end of the season when Darren Cahill, her coach, announced that he was taking a 12-month break in order to spend more time with his family. Going into the new year without the man who guided her to the top of the world rankings and to her first Grand Slam title will be a major challenge for Halep, but she has demonstrated her ability to bounce back from disappointments on plenty of occasions in the past.

"Always in my life it's been about the journey not being easy," she said. "It's never been a case of just 'OK, you go and win now and that's it.' I've always had to fight for things." [@](#)