

# London calling

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## Sharapova on course for Wimbledon after opening win in Italian Open

**ROME:** Maria Sharapova guaranteed herself a spot in the Wimbledon qualifying tournament with a first-round victory against American Christina McHale at the Italian Open.

The Russian former world number one, given a wildcard to compete in Rome after returning from a 15-month doping ban, dropped serve three times in a scrappy opening set, but won 6-4, 6-2 to reach round two.

"It felt slow and the conditions are quite different to Madrid," said Sharapova.

"It certainly took a few more games than I would have liked to get used to. But once I did, I felt like I took care of the second set quite well."

Sharapova faces a battle to raise her ranking enough to qualify for the grasscourt Grand Slam by right and spare organisers the dilemma of whether to award her a wildcard into the main draw of the tournament she won in 2004.

Should the 30-year-old three-time Rome champion, ranked 211 in the world, reach the semi-finals, she would almost certainly earn an automatic Wimbledon main draw slot ahead of the May 22 rankings cut-off date.

Her second-round opponent will be Croatian veteran Mirjana Lucic-Baroni who she beat in the Madrid tournament last week before losing a grudge match against Eugenie Bouchard.

Canadian Bouchard had called for five-time Grand Slam champion Sharapova to be banned for life after testing positive for heart drug meldonium at last year's Australian Open, referring to the Russian as a "cheater".

Several other players have criticised the decision of tournament organisers to welcome Sharapova back so readily.

If Sharapova fails to reach the semi-finals in Rome, the Wimbledon Championships wildcard committee would have to decide whether to fast-track her into the main draw or let her take her chances in qualifying.

The qualifying tournament is held the week before in Roehampton — potentially creating a security headache if Sharapova plays.

At a recent news conference All England Club officials said this year's qualifying tournament, previously free for the public, would be ticketed and restricted to 1,000 fans. — Reuters

