

Jarmila Groth marked her first Fed Cup appearance for Australia with a shock win against French Open champion Francesca Schiavone as holders Italy shared the opening singles in their first round tie in Hobart.

Groth, who represented Slovakia before taking Australian citizenship in 2009 by marriage, beat the world number four 6-7 6-3 6-3 to give Australia a great start before Samantha Stosur, runner-up to Schiavone in Paris last year, lost a titanic struggle with Flavia Pennetta to leave the tie poised at 1-1.

The reverse singles and doubles take place on Sunday.

"It is one of the great wins for me and I am happy and excited," the 23-year-old Groth, who married Australian player Samuel Groth, said on the ITF's website.

Surprisingly, the experienced Schiavone said she had been taken by surprise despite Groth being ranked 31st in the world.

"My level was not so high and she got right shots and played good," the 30-year-old Italian said. "I'd never seen her play and I was passive a little bit and she won."

Groth's victory meant Italy were still searching for their first ever point against Australia in Fed Cup play when Pennetta walked on court to face world number five Stosur - a sequence of 16 consecutive defeats.

Pennetta ended that run with a 7-6 6-7 6-4 victory in a match interrupted for an hour by rain.

Stosur served for the first set at 5-3 but allowed Pennetta back to take the opener and although she levelled the match by snatching the second set tiebreak she was unable to post a first career victory against her Italian opponent.

"Any time you serve for the first two sets and lose, it is disappointing," said Stosur, who will face her Roland Garros nemesis in Sunday's first singles.

The winner of the tie in Hobart will face the winner between Russia and France.

Russia's big-name players failed to fire as they slipped to a 2-0 deficit against France in Moscow.

Alize Cornet overcame an ankle injury to produce a spirited fightback and beat Svetlana Kunzetsova 3-6 6-3 6-4, to give the visitors the early lead before Virginie Razzano stunned Maria Sharapova, playing her first Fed Cup match since 2007, with a 6-2 6-3 win.

Belgium moved a step closer to a place in the semi-finals as they took a 2-0 lead over the USA, beaten finalists in the past two years, in Antwerp.

Yanina Wickmayer got the hosts off to the perfect start with a 6-1 7-6(6) win over Bethanie Mattek-Sands before world number two Kim Clijsters extended their lead with a 6-0 6-4 drubbing of youngster Melanie Oudin.

The Czech Republic are also within striking distance of the last four as they took a 2-0 lead over Slovakia in Bratislava.

Lucie Safarova was made to work hard, in the first set at least, for her 7-5 6-1 win over Daniel Hantuchova before in-form Petra Kvitova, an Australian Open quarter-finalist last month, beat Dominika Cibulkova 6-2 6-3.

Reuters