



PHOTO: REUTERS

WHERE THE GRASS IS GREENER

SAKEB SUBHAN

Serving to stay in the tournament at a lung-busting 9-10 in the deciding set of the fourth round on Monday, Rafael Nadal was just two points away from an early exit. As usual, he fought tooth and nail and when he saved the break points and won the game, it was not just the usual fist pump accompanied by a roar of "Vamos!" that emerged; the man from Manacor was more animated than usual, pep talk-ing himself all the way from the net, where the point finished, back to his mark. He however went on to lose a marathon match by losing the set 15-13 to the big-serving and eerily calm journeyman Gilles Muller, much to the anguish of himself and his millions of fans hoping for the next step of his resurgence after he won the French Open for the 10th time a month ago.

Even without a third Wimbledon title Nadal's career is a legendary one, but the only grass court Major of the year and the culmination of a season that is the shortest of the three surfaces is a special one for players of Nadal's rare pedigree as well as those of Muller's. It is a Grand Slam that is arguably the most prestigious of the four tennis highlights of the year, but bare prestige is not why even all-time greats reach covetously for the prize—Wimbledon also showcases the best of tennis. Even though the grass has slowed down since the days of 'Pistol' Pete Sampras, it is still one of the fastest surfaces and the low bounce rewards those who can advance up the court and play attacking shots accurately—which is perhaps why the very best rise to the top in southwest London.

Four players have dominated men's tennis over the last decade and nowhere has that dominance been more prevalent than in Wimbledon, where since 2003 there have only been four winners in 14 editions—Federer (7), Novak Djokovic (3),

Nadal (2) and Andy Murray (2). Since 2006, two of these four have contested the final against each other in all years except 2009, 2010 and 2016.

It is much the same on the women's side. There have been as few as six winners since 2003, with Serena Williams ruling the roost with five of her seven titles in that period.

Nadal's exit means that a dream semi-final lineup of the top four playing each other—perhaps the last time it could have happened at Wimbledon given the advancing years of the players in question—will not come to pass. At the time of writing on Tuesday, it is assumed that Djokovic, Federer and Murray will win their respective quarterfinals, but that is by no means a foregone conclusion, as their respective opponents Tomas Berdych, last year's runner-up Milos Raonic and Sam Querrey may well cause upsets like the one that felled Nadal.

But assuming the form book holds, this Friday is a great time to be a tennis fan because stakes will be so high for the presumed participants. Federer is on top of the all-time mountain, a bar he raised by winning his 18th Major title at the Australian Open in January, at the age of 35 and after a six-month injury layoff. But Wimbledon is where his heart is. He holds seven titles here, tied with Sampras as the most successful player, and a win will not only make him the undisputed king of grass but a 19th Slam this late in his career will also cement his claim to being the greatest of all time.

Djokovic, meanwhile, will badly want to beat Federer (if that match-up does come to pass, foretelling Wimbledon semi lineups is a fraught exercise), and move one step closer to his 13th Major title. His

dominance since 2011 to mid-2016 has dwarfed even those of Nadal's and Federer's in their respective primes, but the drop-off since he achieved the Career Slam by winning the 2016 French Open has been steep. At the end of 2016 he lost the number one ranking that was seemingly his to keep to Murray, who went on a tear for the latter part of 2016, and has now slipped to number four in the world.

But his

Murray's achievement has been to keep his head above water and land a few blows in the era of three all-time greats. His three Major titles pale in comparison to the collections of the greater three, but two of those have come at Wimbledon, his home Slam where he broke a 77-year drought of home-grown champions in 2013. His current reign as number one, set to continue through Wimbledon after Nadal's exit, is the one tenuous claim he has to be spoken of in the same breath as the other three (who are the only other number ones since Federer's rise in the early 2000s) and a third Wimbledon title by beating either Federer or Djokovic will only strengthen that claim.

While things seem sewn up on the men's side with three champions seeded to get through to the semis still alive at the time of writing, it is a bit more uncertain for the women. There was only one former champion left on Tuesday in the 37-year-old Venus Williams, who won the last of her five titles in 2008, after which she contracted an auto-immune disorder that left her prone to fatigue and joint pain. While there is a greater chance of a first-time champion come Sunday, a Williams win will be a story for the ages, and few would begrudge her that.

That is what tennis Majors and especially Wimbledon does—create stories. Whatever the outcome and however right or wrong some of the above forecasts are, given the stakes, the next three days are likely to be among the most special days of the year in sport, because whoever is holding the coveted trophy aloft will put down a marker on their sport's history.



PHOTO: REUTERS

form seems to have returned as he has not dropped a set en route to the quarterfinals. For the sake of pride and glory and of course the privileged ambition of cementing a legacy as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of all time, Djokovic will desperately want his hands on his fourth Wimbledon title.

Current world number one and defending champion Murray is a distant fourth in the Big Four of tennis, because while the other three have dominated,