

'It feels really incredible for me'



AGENCIES

AO Naomi Osaka gave Jennifer Brady a lesson in Grand Slam tennis as she cruised to a 6-4, 6-3 win to secure her second Australian Open title yesterday and cement her standing as the new queen of the women's game.

Osaka's victory over the 22nd-seeded American at a floodlit Rod Laver Arena gave the Japanese third seed her fourth major crown at the age of 23.

Fans hoping for a repeat of the pair's engrossing U.S. Open semi-final last year were left disappointed as Brady froze in the spotlight of her first Grand Slam final. U.S. Open champion Osaka played some way short of her best tennis and joined Brady in contributing to a dour, error-strewn first set.

But she settled to clinch six straight games, roaring to a 4-0 lead in the second before serving out the match to love. A big serve sealed it, causing Brady to fire a forehand return long, and Osaka held her racket over her head and beamed in an understated celebration.

Osaka, who won the 2019 tournament, offered Brady warm congratulations and thanked the fans at the trophy ceremony. "When we played in the semis of the U.S. Open, a couple of months ago, and I told everyone that 'Listen you're going to be a problem'. And I was right," said Osaka, who will be world number two when the rankings

are updated. "It feels really incredible for me. I didn't play my last Grand Slam with fans so just to have this energy it really means a lot."

Naomi Osaka has proven without a shadow of a doubt that she is the successor to Serena Williams as the queen of women's tennis.

Ruthless in her execution on the court, Osaka was typically charming in her acceptance speech afterwards, with the crowd at times in stitches and others in rapturous applause as they got another window into the multi-faceted personality who is becoming the biggest star in women's tennis. However, despite the dominant scoreline, the Japanese star didn't have the final all her own way, admitting afterwards that Brady was "going to be a problem" for her after awkwardly asking her if she should call her "Jenny or Jennifer".

Osaka was assured when she needed to be to stop a bulldozing first set comeback from Brady and awesome once the second set began, breaking early before bullying the American on the way to the finish line.

At the age of 23, Osaka has now won four Grand Slams, two Australian Opens and two US Opens, to make her the undisputed superstar of her generation. She is just two Slams behind Serena Williams' tally at the same age, with the 23-time major winning 39-year-old having already achieved the 'Serena Slam' by her 24th birthday.

SUSPICIONS OF MATCH-FIXING

AFC instructs BFF to conduct investigation

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) yesterday asked Bangladesh Premier League outfits Brothers Union and Arambagh KS for a second time to explain their positions over suspicions of match-fixing and betting during a few league matches.

The game's local governing body asked for a reply within 48 hours after AFC queried about five suspicious matches of the ongoing league.

"For two to three weeks, we have been working on five suspicious betting matches involving Arambagh KS and Brothers Union," said BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag.

"We have sent letters to the clubs today for a second time to explain their positions over specific allegations of match-fixing and online betting. We will send a third letter tomorrow," Shohag continued, adding that they are likely to send details of their investigation to AFC by mid-March.

Brothers have already replied to the first letter denying the allegations while Arambagh KS were supposed to reply last night.

AFC, which monitors the top-tier league matches in different countries through a third party, raised doubts over five matches - Arambagh vs Abahani, Arambagh vs Sheikh Russel, Arambagh vs Mohammedan, Brothers vs Bashundhara Kings and Brothers vs Abahani.

Replying to a query, BFF competitions manager Zaber Bin Taher Ansari said, "The opponents of Arambagh and Brothers Union are not involved with these allegations which is why we did not ask them for any explanation."

Lack of foresight in spotlight

MAZHAR UDDIN



Over 20 years after being made part of cricket's most elite format, questions still linger regarding whether Bangladesh has developed a

proper Test culture.

Those concerns were voiced vociferously following a humiliating whitewash in a two-match home series against a West Indies team made up of second and third-choice players, leaving their record in 121 Tests standing at 91 losses and just 14 wins.

Many have pointed out that Bangladesh has not had sufficient opportunities to play Tests while others blame the lack of a cricketing structure and environment and a frail mentality from both cricketers and officials.

Just as concerns about the need to improve Test culture were peaking, another aspect came to the fore as the Bangladesh Cricket Board came to terms with reality and granted Shakib Al Hasan permission to skip the two Tests against Sri Lanka to play in the upcoming edition of the cash-rich Indian Premier League.

The decision by the player roped in by Kolkata Knight Riders for 3.2 crore rupees led to some questioning his patriotism, but one top BCB official interestingly said that the board had to accept Shakib's plea because there was no practical chance of the Tigers making an impact in the ongoing ICC Test Championship, where they are yet to bag a point.

The concept of Test cricket and the need to develop a culture around it have been discussed at length over the years and it is about time that the focus shifts towards a coherent and clear long-term plans and processes instead of occasionally tackling the short-term issues that pop up and calling it a day.

The onus is now on the BCB and how they emphasise the longer-version of the game to encourage and create an urge among players to play Test cricket.

"If you look at Bangladesh's graph in Test cricket over the last ten years, you won't see any consistency. The matches we were able to win against top teams actually came through some individual brilliance. If we want to make Test cricket exciting for the players, we need to prioritise. The board needs to think about what should be done to make this happen. Although it should have been done ten years ago, it's fine if you start now," said former chief selector Faruk Ahmed.

It is also important that the authorities who are running the board have the patience to form a structure that will give benefits in the long run. However, people within the board at times want overnight success. It is the board's duty to motivate players

and make longer-version cricket more exciting and not just blame players by saying they don't want to play longer-version domestic leagues."

Another point to consider is whether the board has thought beyond Shakib and other senior members and adequately prepared a new lot of next generation cricketers for the future. "England, India and Australia value their first-class culture and their players take part in the first-class competitions as a form of camaraderie. Also, if you play well in first-class competitions, you get value and are rated as a good player. But that is not the case for our first-class cricketers. I am not just talking about the financial aspect, it is important to empower first-class cricketers to encourage them and grow the urge to be a Test player," prominent local coach and mentor Nazmul Abedin Fahim told The Daily Star.

The likes of India, England, New Zealand, and Australia have accepted the reality of modern-day cricket, such as the need to give players mental breaks and, with that in mind, prepare a bigger pool of cricketers so as not to

been prepared for this. Shakib might have thought the board would not allow him to play IPL, but he also felt that he had to play in the best league in the world and compete with the best. Money is also a big factor and the emotion of people is not wrong either in this case," Nazmul added.

On the other hand, allowing your best player to compete in the most competitive and lucrative cricket league in the world actually helps the player grow further. Afghanistan players are now reaping the benefits of playing in franchise leagues and gaining experience despite having hardly any cricketing structure in their country.

However, things have been the opposite from Bangladesh's point of view as the board, team management, supporters, and, at times, the players too lost their faith in the existing group of cricketers in the absence of their best performer. "The reason everyone relies on Shakib is simple. It is because he outperforms everyone in all formats and you cannot deny that fact. You need two players to replace him and we haven't found a proper replacement yet. But having said that



discourage those who want to skip one or two series.

When Indian skipper and their best performer, Virat Kohli, was granted a leave from the crucial Australia series, the BCCI was adequately prepared to face Australia because of strong backup options. Eventually, they went on to record a historic series win.

The BCB should have thought of the current scenario and prepared for someone like Shakib -- who has been a long-serving performer for Bangladesh cricket over the years and who is now in mid-thirties -- to start prioritising his views. It perhaps would have been nice if Shakib had decided otherwise, but one cannot fault him for not leaving millions on the table in order to participate in a series that is not shaping up to be a good one for the Tigers.

"He has been by far our best player over the years and we should have kept that in mind. If the board had strategically handled the situation long ago then everyone would have

you also need to give some time to others as well," former Bangladesh batsman and international cricket commentator Athar Ali Khan said.

"This is however not the first time that a player has chosen franchise leagues ahead of their country. It's hard to refuse such a huge amount of money. Yes, national duty comes first but you can't just point a finger at Shakib. You also have to understand every person has their own way of living life."

He prescribed that the board needed to emphasise more on longer-version cricket at the domestic level by involving age-level cricketers. "I think it's important that the board utilises the window provided by the ICC for the IPL, when no international series are scheduled. I want to see a win-win situation for both BCB and Shakib or even Mustafizur Rahman. We need to figure out how we can allow our more players to play in the IPL or other leagues as well as play for the national team," Athar added.

Djokovic defends dynasty against Medvedev

REUTERS, Melbourne

A very different Australian Open comes to a familiar end today as Novak Djokovic looks to thwart another challenge to his Melbourne Park dynasty from the latest Grand Slam aspirant in Daniil Medvedev.

Victory over fourth seed Medvedev would mean an 18th Grand Slam title for Djokovic, pulling him within two of the record 20 shared by "Big Three" rivals Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal.

While Djokovic has never lost a final at Melbourne Park, his reign has rarely looked so vulnerable. He suffered a huge scare against Dominic Thiem in the five-set decider last year, and Medvedev is possibly the player he would least like to face.

Not for nothing did Djokovic brand him "the man to beat". The rangy Russian has been a machine since November, clinching the Paris Masters, the ATP Finals and the team-based ATP Cup in a 20-match winning streak that has included 12 straight victories over top-10 opponents.



NOVAK DJOKOVIC
Age: 33
ATP ranking: 1
Grand Slam titles: 17
Career ATP titles: 81
2020 Australian Open: Champion
Best Australian Open performance: Champion (2008, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020)

DANIIL MEDVEDEV
Age: 25
ATP ranking: 4
Grand Slam titles: 0
Career ATP titles: 9
2020 Australian Open: Fourth round Best Australian Open performance: Final (2021)

HEAD-TO-HEAD:
DJOKOVIC LEADS 4-3

Kings go six points clear



Bashundhara Kings goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico dives to his right to save Kenneth Ngowke's spot-kick as the defending champions edged Saif SC 2-1 in their Bangladesh Premier League fixture at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

SPORTS REPORTER



Leaders Bashundhara Kings maintained their unbeaten run in the Bangladesh Premier League with a 2-1 win over Saif SC at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The ninth win in 10 matches put Kings six points clear of second-placed Abahani, who raised their tally to 22 points with a 1-1 draw against fourth-placed Sheikh Russel KC in the last match of the day at the same venue. The match between Saif and Kings reminded a bit of the final of this season's Federation Cup as Saif looked more spirited and determined to turn the table against the defending champions, who had won the cup final 1-0.

Despite lacking consistency and coming on the back of a 2-0 defeat

against Abahani, Saif started with an aggressive attitude and took an 18th-minute lead with John O'Koli running down the left flank and entering the box before shrugging off Yeasin Khan to place the ball into the net past the dive of Kings' goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico.

After conceding the lead for first time in 10 matches, Kings bounced back strongly to level the margin in the 34th minute when Towhidul Alam Sabuz headed in a rebound from close range after Saif goalkeeper Saiful Islam failed to grip a low shot from Jonathan Fernandes. Three minutes later, Brazilian forward Robson Da Silva scored his 10th goal of the campaign with a 35-yard screamer, giving Saiful no time to react. Sixth-placed Saif should have got one point from the match but Kenneth Ngowke wasted the opportunity from the spot in the

82nd minute, with Zico making a fine save.

RUSSEL DENY ABAHANI

Title contenders Abahani stumbled again after consecutive wins as the six-time champions were held to a draw for the third time in 10 matches. The Sky Blues looked on course for a seventh victory following a 26th-minute goal from Saad Uddin, but Tajik defender Siyovush Asrorov denied the Dhanmondi-based outfit by heading home a free-kick from Khalekur Zaman in the stoppage time.

ARAMBAGH BREAK THEIR DUCK

After a record eighth straight defeat, bottom-placed Arambagh registered their first points on the board with a 4-4 draw against Uttar Baridhara at the Shaheed Ahsan Ullah Master Stadium in Tongi. The result lifted 11th-placed Baridhara to six points from nine matches.

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