

KING NOVAK continues Melbourne reign

REUTERS, Melbourne

Novak Djokovic thanked the blue court at the Rod Laver Arena after picking up a record-extending ninth Australian Open title yesterday with a 7-5, 6-2, 6-2 win over Russian Daniil Medvedev.

With Sunday's win, the world number one took his Grand Slam tally to 18, just two shy of Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal's men's record of 20. "Last but not least I would like to thank this court," the Serbian said during the trophy presentation.

Djokovic faced a lot of flak in the lead-up to the year's Grand Slam for requesting that organisers ease strict quarantine protocols for players in Australia. He thanked the organisers for a "great effort" to host the Grand Slam amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Much like Dominic Thiem in last year's final, Djokovic faced an opponent desperate for success and his own seat at the Grand Slam table. Unlike

HIGHLIGHT

Novak Djokovic won his ninth Australian Open title, a tournament record on the men's side, yesterday and 18th Grand Slam overall. It's his second hat-trick of titles at Melbourne Park after his 2011-13 treble. The Serbian is now within two Grand Slam titles of Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, who each own 20 men's singles championships, making this race the closest its ever been among the three all-time greats. Djokovic now has won six Grand Slam titles after the age of 30, equalling Nadal's record.

Thiem, who pushed Djokovic to five sets, Medvedev never really threatened in his second Grand Slam final.

Djokovic made a mockery of the Russian's 20-match winning streak and his pre-match barb that all the pressure to win was on the champion. He broke him seven times for the match and closed out the one-sided contest with a net-rush and a brilliant leaping

volley.

Having extended his unbeaten record in nine finals at Melbourne Park, the Serb roared in triumph and wrapped up his team in a group hug.

Djokovic also had words of encouragement for Medvedev.

"I really like Daniil as a person, off the court he's great," Djokovic said. "Always very friendly... On the court, he's definitely one of the toughest players that I ever faced in my life. It's a matter of time when you hold a Grand Slam that's for sure. If you don't mind waiting a few more years. I would like everyone

... to appreciate what he has done, 20-match winning streak in the last couple of months. Amazing."

ATP Finals winner Medvedev acknowledged it was not his best day and hoped he will soon be holding a Grand Slam trophy after losing his second major final after defeat to Rafa Nadal at the 2019 U.S. Open.

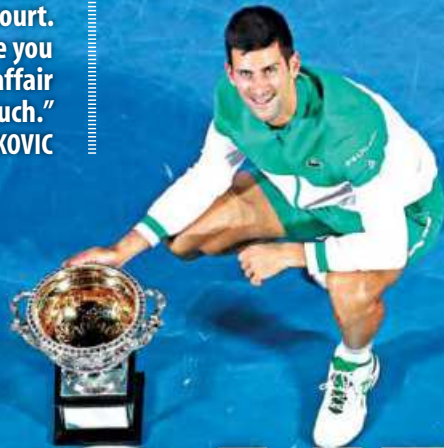
"Never easy to speak when you just lost a final of a Grand Slam," Medvedev said. "But I'll try to do my best, better than on court I hope."

"Just to tell you a small story, guys. I first practised with Novak when I was like 500-600 in the world in Monaco. He was already number one. Just won Wimbledon. I thought okay he's not going to speak to me or something, because the guy was a God for me. Because I was shy so I didn't speak. He was asking the questions, talking to me like a friend. I was really surprised. It never changed since I was 600 in the world or four in the world, you're a great sport, great person. So congratulations."

"Never easy to speak when you just lost a final of a Grand Slam. First of all, congrats to Novak and your team. Nine Grand Slams in Australia. 18 in total is amazing and probably not your last one. I have no words to say."

DANIIL MEDVEDEV

"Last but not least I would like to thank this court. I would like to thank Rod Laver Arena. I love you each year more and more. It's been a love affair that keeps growing. Thank you so much."
NOVAK DJOKOVIC



MELBOURNE



'It's important for seamers to remain patient'

SPORTS REPORTER



After being ignored and avoided in the two-match Test series at home against the West Indies, when the Tigers' team management opted for just one seamer in the playing XI, there will be a lot of focus and emphasis on the pacers when the Bangladesh team take flight for New Zealand for three-match ODI and three-match T20I series starting from March 20.

The 20-member squad features seven seamers including Rubel Hossain, Taskin Ahmed, Al Amin Hossain, Hasan Mahmud, Shoriful Islam, Mustafizur Rahman, and all-rounder Saif Uddin.

There are sky-high expectations that they will deliver on seam-friendly conditions in the limited-overs format, but a lack of match preparation and experience in utilising pace-friendly wickets has often left the Bangladesh pacers unable to extract the most from surfaces.

The Bangladesh team management will surely want to utilise the opportunity this time around but one of the most consistent and regular performers in the longest format, Abu Jayed, will not be a part of the fast-bowling contingent.

The right-arm pacer performed strongly in the second Test in Dhaka, where he bagged six wickets after being left out of

the Dhaka Test and, more importantly, showed a lot of hunger and promise.

Despite being amongst the wickets, Jayed has had to accept his reality as a Test specialist. According to 27-year-old, it is the urge to improve every day that can have a positive impact on the mindset of a bowler.

"I think it's important for seamers to remain patient. This is the key to success for any fast bowler. Although I play the longest version, even when you play limited-overs cricket you need to bowl in the right areas consistently. Obviously, the batters want to go hard at you in the limited-over formats, where variations come into play for bowlers," Jayed told The Daily Star.

"At times, pacers may get carried away when they see a lot of bounce and swing in the surface but it is essential to hit the right areas and utilise the bounce."

Although Jayed is not part of the Tigers' limited over set-up, the Sylhet native believes the Tigers' pace attack has got variety with a blend of youth and experience that could play a big role in any condition.

"We have got a good bunch of fast bowlers at the moment. There are few youngsters who showed a lot of promise along with the likes of Taskin, Rubel and Mustafizur, who offer a lot of experience. I think we can be a good fast-bowling force in world cricket in the coming days," he added.

Late penalty disrupts Barca's winning run

REUTERS, Barcelona



Lionel Messi marked his record 506th appearance for Barcelona in La Liga by scoring a penalty but the Catalans could only draw 1-1 with Cadiz on Saturday after conceding a spot-kick late on.

The Argentine overtook former team mate Xavi Hernandez in the all-time list of Barca appearances in the league and opened the scoring in the 32nd minute by calmly passing the ball into the bottom corner from the spot after Pedri had been tripped by Cadiz's Iza.

Fielding the same starting 11 that had been thrashed 4-1 at home to Paris St Germain in the Champions League on Tuesday, a rusty looking Barca failed to build on their lead and paid the price when Clement Lenglet gave away a penalty for striking Cadiz forward Ruben Sobrino as he tried to clear the ball.

Cadiz's Alex Fernandez made no mistake from the spot in the 89th minute to disrupt Barca's run of seven straight league wins as the Catalans failed to take advantage of La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid's surprise 2-0 defeat by Levante a day earlier.

Barca are third in the standings on 47 points, trailing leaders Atletico by eight points and second-placed Real Madrid by five points. Cadiz are 14th on 25 points.



Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi, who put his side ahead in the 32nd minute against Cadiz, looks dejected after an 89th-minute equaliser from Alex Fernandez at the Camp Nou on Sunday. PHOTO: REUTERS

AFC can't bow down to Afghan pressure

Time the Asian football body reconsidered its plan on WC qualifying fixtures

ATIQUE ANAM



The governing body of Asian football, AFC, on Thursday issued a statement following discussions with its member associations, saying that a majority of the remaining World Cup/Asian Cup qualifying fixtures of Round-2 have been deferred to June in light of existing travel and quarantine restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic across the continent.

The statement also said AFC has been working with member associations grouped together to help them make their own arrangements and play out the remaining games at one venue.

The second statement, given AFC's rigid stance on finishing the remaining matches by June 15, has put countries such as Bangladesh in a pickle.

How? To understand that we need to take a look at where Bangladesh stand in terms of their qualifying campaign.

The men in red and green have played five of their eight matches -- each team in a group of five teams was originally scheduled to play twice against every other team, home and away -- and they have played four of those five matches away from home.

While Bangladesh only managed one point from those five matches, they were banking on the remaining three matches, or to be more precise, on the two matches against Afghanistan and India to earn some valuable points and move up from the fifth position that they currently occupy.

While qualifying for the next round of World Cup qualifiers was never realistically on Bangladesh's agenda, there was a genuine conviction among the

Bangladesh ranks that a third or even a fourth place finish in the group, which could ensure them a direct berth in the next round of Asian Cup qualifiers, was not out of their reach -- a conviction strengthened by their fighting draw against India in Kolkata and a narrow defeat at home against Qatar, both taking place in 2019.

But those hopes could very well be dashed or at least suffer a huge blow if AFC's plans, with consent from a majority of members under unique circumstances shaped by Covid-19, are realised.

The plan is, as stated before, to stage the remaining matches of the group at a centralised venue -- likely in Qatar or Oman -- during the May 31-June 15 FIFA window, so that the travel restrictions and quarantine issues could be somewhat mitigated.

But that puts Bangladesh, who were supposed to play these matches at home, in a very tricky situation. Home advantage is always a big one in football for obvious reasons and the fact that home advantage becomes even more significant for countries like Bangladesh is well documented too -- that performance against Qatar in 2019 and the 2011 World Cup qualifying home-leg win against Lebanon are two cases in point.

Bangladesh coach Jamie Day asserts how important the remaining matches are for his team and how crucial the home advantage could be.

"We all want the games to be in Bangladesh as it would be an unfair disadvantage for us if the games are held at a neutral venue. It would also mean we play five out of six games away from home, which is not acceptable," the coach said during a conversation with The Daily Star.

While it looks increasingly

likely, although not absolutely certain at this stage, that Bangladesh might have to play against India and Oman at a centralised venue overseas, there is still a strong possibility of hosting Afghanistan in Sylhet on March 25 as per the original schedule.

That possibility, though, hinges on a verdict from the AFC, to be delivered on February 23, following presentation of arguments from Bangladesh on staging the match in Bangladesh and arguments from Afghanistan against it.



What we know so far is that Afghanistan have appealed to AFC to play this match at a centralised venue in June, citing a lack of preparation time ahead of the match due to their players' engagement in leagues of different countries together with the issue of quarantine protocol in Bangladesh.

The argument, by default, is a weak one in light of clear guidelines on club versus country conflicts when it comes to national team engagements. The match falls in a FIFA window, which should suffice to compel Afghanistan to muster their resources and pack their bags for Sylhet.

Any other concern from the Afghans regarding the Covid situation in Bangladesh should logically be summarily dismissed by the AFC, which has already given its go-ahead to four matches to take place as per previous schedule, among those is Nepal hosting Australia in Kathmandu on March 30.

Nepal's current Covid situation is not much better than Bangladesh's in nature, if not magnitude, and Australia face the same predicament as Afghanistan when it comes to quarantine

protocols and players' availability. So why is Afghanistan not willing to come to Bangladesh while Australia is happy to travel to Nepal? Probably because Australia know they would be too strong, even without a few of their first-choice players, against Nepal while Afghanistan fear they might lose away to Bangladesh even with their full-strength side.

"We are preparing our case with a few specific points: the improved situation of Covid-19 in the country, the FIFA friendly matches held against Nepal in November, the ongoing leagues in the country and recent cricket series against the West Indies

held in Dhaka and Chattogram," Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag told The Daily Star.

Jamie Day, however, was less forgiving in his assessment of the situation.

"I think if teams refuse to travel to Bangladesh to play, then we should be given the points," Day said, his comment likely based on the benchmark that the likes of FIFA and AFC have come to set.

Day has every reason to feel a little frustrated, given that among all five nations in the group, Bangladesh stand to lose the most if the remaining fixtures are moved to a centralised venue. Only Bangladesh have all three home matches left while Qatar have none, Afghanistan and Oman have one each and India have two home matches left.

And given the tight competition at the lower end of the points table, home advantage could play a big part in deciding the final standing -- a win over Afghanistan would see Day's men catapult to third position ahead of both Afghanistan and India.

We would like to be hopeful, though, and believe that the strong arguments in favour of Bangladesh trample those by Afghanistan and would further hope that a smooth staging of that match in Sylhet would convince AFC to move away from its intended path and back to the original plan, even if it needs a bit of flexibility regarding deadlines and enduring the obvious hassles of decentralised football in pandemic times.

With Covid vaccination gathering pace across the globe and travel restrictions easing off, we could be in for much less complicated times come June anyway.