

NADAL, DJOKOVIC chase history

AFP, Paris

Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic will set their sights on more Grand Slam history at the French Open as Roland Garros embraces a new but eerily empty era of night time tennis.

A 14th title in Paris for Nadal would take him to a record-setting 21st major, surpassing the mark he shares with Roger Federer who has already written off his hopes of adding to his lone success in the French capital back in 2009.

Djokovic, the champion in 2016, can move to 19 Grand Slam titles with victory.

That would make the world number one the first man in over half a century to win all four majors on multiple occasions.

Only one of the sport's 'Big Three' will make the June 13 final after the draw placed top seed Djokovic, third seed Nadal and eighth-seeded Federer in the same half of the draw.

That means Djokovic is scheduled to face Federer in the



Men's champion Rafael Nadal wears a broad grin as he stands next to his own statue at the Roland Garros ahead of the French Open while his great rival Novak Djokovic (bottom) happily obliges to be in a selfie with Federico Coria after vanquishing the Argentine in a preparatory tournament. (R) Meanwhile, women's champion Iga Swiatek was in jolly mood during a training session.

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM



quarterfinals before a potential semifinal blockbuster with Nadal.

"I see it as completely normal. I'm not worried about it. I have a lot of work in front of me to play a potential match versus Djokovic," said Nadal, who has already won

clay court titles this season in Barcelona and Rome.

At last year's delayed Roland Garros, Nadal swept past Djokovic in straight sets in the final.

It was Nadal's 100th win at the tournament against just two losses since his 2005 title-winning debut.

Nadal, who defeated Djokovic in the Rome final, starts his campaign against Alexei Popyrin of Australia, the world number 62.

Giving Djokovic hope, however, is the knowledge that he was responsible for one of Nadal's losses in Paris, in the 2015 quarterfinals.

He is also a four-time runner-up although three of those defeats in the championship match came against the Spaniard.

Only two men have previously managed to win all four of the Slams on more than one occasion - Roy Emerson and Rod Laver of Australia. Laver's achievement came back in 1969.

Djokovic tackles 66th-ranked

Tennis Sandgren of the United States in his first round match while Federer, playing the tournament for the first time since 2019, begins against a qualifier.

Federer, with his 40th birthday fast approaching, remains the sentimental favourite but his priority will be an assault on Wimbledon where he has been champion eight times.

"I'm not so sure in the last 50 years of the French Open, somebody just rocks up at nearly 40 years old, being out for a year and a half, and wins everything straight," said Federer after losing his only clay court match this year in Geneva last week.

Of the chasing pack, two-time runner-up Dominic Thiem is low on form and confidence.

A run to the Madrid semifinals was followed by a straight sets defeat to Cameron Norrie in his Lyon opener.

World number two Daniil

Medvedev has yet to win a match at Roland Garros in four attempts.

In Rome, he fell at the first hurdle and half-jokingly pleaded with the referee to disqualify him such is his dislike for clay.

World number five Stefanos Tsitsipas is the most likely man to upset the odds of Nadal or Djokovic again taking the title.

The 22-year-old Greek won the prestigious Monte Carlo clay court title in April, had match point before losing the Barcelona final to Nadal and then lifted the Lyon trophy.

He has beaten Nadal on clay in Madrid in 2019 and stretched Djokovic to five sets in the 2020 French Open semifinals.

This year's Roland Garros will be the second taking place under the shadow of the coronavirus.

Just over 5,000 fans a day will be allowed on site until June 9 when that figure rises to 13,000.

Swiatek serene as questions linger over rivals

Afp, Paris

Iga Swiatek heads into the French Open trying to become the first player since Serena Williams at Wimbledon in 2016 to successfully defend a women's Grand Slam singles title, with injuries and poor clay form clouding the hopes of several of her chief rivals.

Following her victory in Rome, culminating in a ruthless 46-minute takedown of Karolina Pliskova, Poland's first Grand Slam singles champion returns to Roland Garros just seven months on with a far greater weight of expectation.

Swiatek, who turns 20 next week, was the lowest-ranked woman, then 54th in the world, to win the French Open, shifted from its traditional May-June slot last year due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Like Jelena Ostapenko in 2017, it was her first title at tour level. Unlike the Latvian, who has struggled to reproduce her best tennis regularly, Swiatek appears better equipped to stay at the top.

She entered the top 10 for the first time last week, but has to face close friend Kaja Juvan of Slovenia in her opener in Paris.

"We are friends, but on court everybody is equal. I'm actually good at forgetting that I'm playing against my best friend," Swiatek said Friday.

In theory, this French Open could be the chance for Naomi Osaka to step up on clay.

However, all seven of her career titles, including her four majors, have come on hard surfaces.

The Japanese star was knocked out early in both Madrid and Rome. Her best performance at Roland Garros in four attempts is the third round.

Her preparations have been overshadowed by her decision to boycott all press conferences at the tournament, fearing their effects on her mental health.

The 23-year-old's gesture was lambasted as a "phenomenal mistake" by French tennis chief Gilles Moretton.

Osaka begins against Romania's 63rd-ranked Patricia Maria Tig.

Ashleigh Barty vacated her Roland Garros title after skipping much of the 2020 season citing health and travel risks.

The world number one has won three titles this year and reached the Madrid final, but an arm injury at the Italian Open forced her out of the quarterfinals and cast doubt over her fitness in Paris.

"I think coming back to the site here at Roland Garros is obviously pretty special, pretty cool," said Barty who tackles Bernarda Pera of the United States in the first round.

"A lot of it I don't remember and feels like it was such a long time ago. It's certainly a clean slate for us this week."

As for Serena Williams, now 39, she has won just one of three matches on clay this month having returned after nearly three months away following the Australian Open.

The American remains on 23 Grand Slam titles, one behind Margaret Court's all-time record, and has not gone beyond the last 16 in Paris since losing the 2016 final to Garbine Muguruza.



'There are no big or small teams in this format'

SPORTS REPORTER

With the upcoming edition of Dhaka Premier League set to begin from tomorrow, star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, who will lead Mohammedan Sporting Club this season, is willing to shift focus fully from international cricket to the domestic T20 competition.

The star all-rounder has also chosen to skip the Pakistan Super League despite being snapped up by Lahore Qalandars in last month's auction.

"Obviously our first target will be to gain momentum from the first game and then gradually move forward match by match because it's a long tournament. It will be very important to win the first game because T20 cricket is all about momentum. There are no big or small teams in this format. Whoever plays better cricket will win," Shakib said during the unveiling of Mohammedan's jersey at a city hotel yesterday.

Among others featuring for Mohammedan this season are Taskin Ahmed, Shamsur Rahman, Abu Hider, Abu Jayed and Shuvagata Hom.

In the context of historic sporting

rivalries, Shakib was asked whether he is looking forward to the big match against Abahani.

"I am sure all the club officials and fans, not just me, are waiting for the clash against Abahani. We are all excited. But our main goal is to get those two points from each game regardless of the opponent we play," he said.

Shakib also addressed his below-par performances with the bat in the three-match ODI series against Sri Lanka, with the left-hander scoring just 19 runs in three games and picking up three wickets.

"You have all witnessed what I did in the series. Obviously it did not go the way I expected but it can happen in cricket. I have to make sure that I don't repeat that again."

The star all-rounder also believed a maiden ODI series win against Sri Lanka was something the Tigers could be proud of.

"It feels good to win a first-ever series against Sri Lanka but it would have been great if we could have won the series 3-0. Having said that, if Sri Lanka also played their best cricket the result would have gone the other way. But overall we all should be proud of the result and should move forward from there," he added.

A mixed but encouraging bag

SPORTS REPORTER



The 2-1 ODI series win over Sri Lanka was not only Bangladesh's maiden bilateral ODI series win against the nation, but also managed to vault the Tigers to the top of the ICC ODI Super League. The Tigers' think-tank was seeking improvement in quite a few areas before the start of the series but despite the result, there are still aspects which Bangladesh will really want to work on. Here, the Daily Star tries to assess the Tigers' performance in all three departments in the just-concluded series against Sri Lanka.

OPENING FAILURE

As in the past, the Tigers' batting department remained the biggest cause for concern in all three games against Sri Lanka. The openers are yet to add a 50-plus partnership in their last nine games, including the series against Sri Lanka when they put on 5, 15, and 2. Bangladesh are also yet to find a settled opening partner for Tamim Iqbal, with Liton Das continuing his poor run in the series with scores of 0 and 25 before being dropped for the third

game. Naim Sheikh, who replaced Liton for the third ODI, also failed to utilise the opportunity and scored just one.

OFF-COLOR SHAKIB

A lot was expected of Shakib Al Hasan, who returned to his usual number three position against

of Bangladesh's batting department across the three games. In fact, the wicketkeeper-batsman waged a lone battle to secure the series victory.

The right-hander was the top run-getter in the series with 237, which included one hundred and a fifty. Mushfiqur rescued the Tigers twice

that Bangladesh could post enough runs on the board. Mahmudullah also played his part and scored two fifties in three games.

FIELDING WORRIES CONTINUE

Prior to the start of the series, skipper Tamim stated that they wanted to improve fielding and catching, which have been below-par over the past few series. Although the fielding was decent in the first two games, the Tigers were again guilty of dropping catches in the third and final ODI. Fielders dropped three chances to send back Lankan skipper Kusal Perera, who went on to register a century and win his side the game.

BOWLERS JOIN THE PARTY

Bangladesh's bowling department has remained the most consistent area of the team throughout the series, successfully defending scores of 257 and 246. Off-spinner Mehedi Hasan Miraz was the most successful bowler for Bangladesh with seven wickets and he jumped to second position in the ICC's ODI Bowlers Rankings. Apart from Miraz, pacers like Mustafizur Rahman and Taskin Ahmed showed good skill alongside young Shoriful Islam, who made his ODI debut in this series.

TOP THREE RUN-GETTERS FOR BANGLADESH

Player	Match	Runs	HS	Avg	100	50
Mushfiqur Rahim	3	237	125	79.00	1	1
Mahmudullah Riyad	3	148	54	49.33	0	2
Tamim Iqbal	3	82	52	27.33	0	1

TOP THREE WICKET-TAKERS FOR BANGLADESH

Player	Match	Overs	Wkts	BBI	Avg	Econ
Mehedi Hasan Miraz	3	30	7	4/30	15.14	3.53
Mustafizur Rahman	3	25	6	3/16	16.16	3.88
Taskin Ahmed	3	26	4	4/46	33.75	5.19

Sri Lanka after a phenomenal performance in the 2019 ICC World Cup. But the star cricketer failed to live up to the billing, scoring 15, 0 and 4. Although the star cricketer was economical with the ball, he managed to pick just three wickets in as many games.

MAJESTIC MUSHFIQUR

Mushfiqur Rahim was the anchor

alongside Mahmudullah Riyad, when Bangladesh were struggling on 99 for four and 77 for four in the first two ODIs respectively. In the first game, Mushfiqur scored 84 off 87 balls before registering his eighth ODI hundred in the second game. Mushfiqur was the last batsman to be dismissed for the Tigers but not before he ensured



BOOTERS BEGIN TRAINING IN QATAR

All 23 members of the national football team along with the coaching staff tested negative in Covid tests yesterday, following their arrival in Qatar on Friday. The team had a gym session at the hotel in the morning before getting to the university ground for a practice session. The booters, who are currently bottom of their group, will play their three remaining World Cup qualifying matches on June 3, 7 and 15 against Afghanistan, India and Oman respectively.

PHOTO: BFF