

Djokovic one win away from historic 22nd

AFP, Melbourne

A rampant Novak Djokovic surged into a 10th Australian Open final Friday to close in on a record-equalling 22nd Grand Slam crown, with only Stefanos Tsitsipas now standing in his way.

The Serbian fourth seed overcame an early wobble to romp past unseeded American Tommy Paul 7-5, 6-1, 6-2 on Rod Laver Arena in style.

Another title on Sunday will move him alongside Rafael Nadal with 22 Slam wins and see the 35-year-old return to world number one for the first time since last June.

Greek third seed Tsitsipas, who ground past Russian 18th seed Karen Khachanov 7-6 (7/2), 6-4, 6-7 (6/8), 6-3 in the other semifinal, can also become the top-ranked player should he lift the trophy.

Djokovic played the clash without father Srdjan courtside after he was filmed posing with a man holding a Russian flag featuring Vladimir Putin's face following his son's quarterfinal win on Wednesday.

It sparked a backlash from Ukraine and led to calls for Djokovic's father to be banned from the tournament.

Djokovic said after his match that the incident had been "misinterpreted", that his family was against war and he hoped to have his father back in his box for Sunday's final.

"It has got to me, of course," he said of the controversy swirling around his father.

"You have to find a way just to kind of accept, let it go, just not allow it to consume your day or turn your state of mind into something that you don't want, especially before semifinals or finals of a Grand Slam."

His ruthless win extended Djokovic's unbeaten streak at the Australian Open to 27 matches to claim sole ownership of the Open-era record at Melbourne Park ahead of Andre Agassi.

"I'm really thankful that I have enough gas in my legs to be able to play at this level on one of the biggest tennis courts in the world," added Djokovic, who is now 11-0 for the season and into a 33rd Grand Slam final.

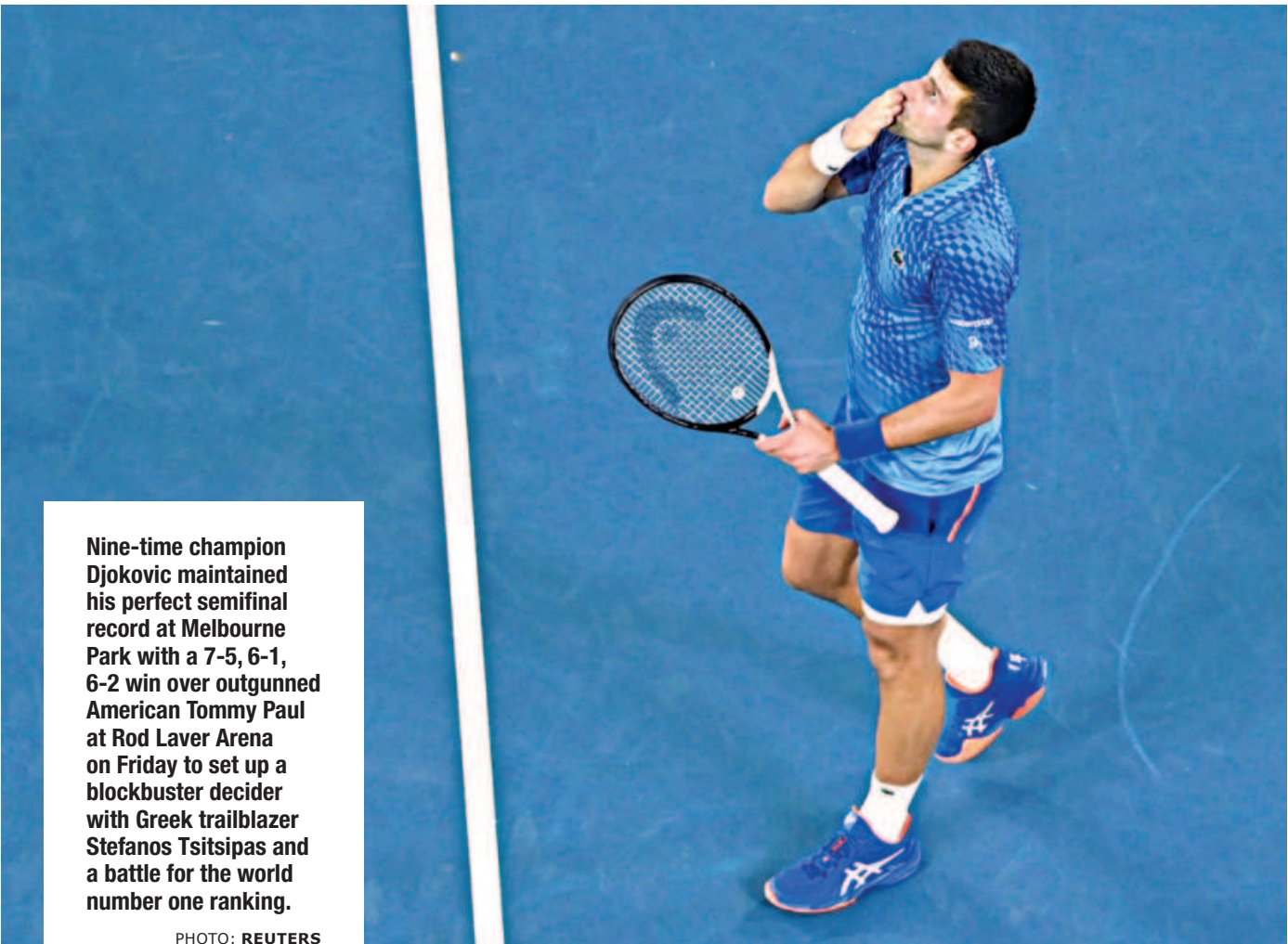
"I know what's expected of me, I've been in this situation so many times in my career. Experience helps also," he added of being in another final.

Djokovic will meet Tsitsipas next after the Greek battled into his first Australian final and only second at a Grand Slam.

In the previous one, at Roland Garros in 2021, he fell to Djokovic in five sets after holding a 2-0 lead.

At 24, Tsitsipas is the youngest man to reach the Melbourne final since a 23-year-old Djokovic in 2011.

"I dreamed as a kid to maybe one day get to play in this court against the best players in the world," said Tsitsipas, who is also unbeaten this season with a 10-0 record.



Nine-time champion Djokovic maintained his perfect semifinal record at Melbourne Park with a 7-5, 6-1, 6-2 win over outgunned American Tommy Paul at Rod Laver Arena on Friday to set up a blockbuster decider with Greek trailblazer Stefanos Tsitsipas and a battle for the world number one ranking.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Sylhet hungry for exposure

SPORTS REPORTER from Sylhet

As the Bangladesh Premier League came to the idyllic Sylhet International Cricket Stadium, there came vibrancy and crowds turning up in numbers to watch the Sylhet Strikers play Rangpur Riders yesterday. But beneath the glitter of the BPL, there is a disappointment from Sylhet's organisers at not being able to host international matches regularly despite having the facilities required to become a truly international venue.

The venue hosted its last ODI in 2020 and the only Test played here was back in 2018, when Zimbabwe played Bangladesh. The last men's T20I was played in the same year as well.

"We believe that, given the facilities, beauty and everything else, we should host more tournaments here. We always expect that but often find ourselves being disappointed. We didn't get the England tour but Ireland's tour will take place here, so we are hopeful," BCB director and women's wing chairman Shafiqul Alam Chowdhury told reporters yesterday.

"We had some limitations in regards to accommodation and practice facilities, but we overcame them and made quite a lot of progress. I am hopeful that those who decide on the fixtures and venues will be kinder," he added.

The airport road is not congested while the hotel, which is Sylhet's main accommodation arrangement for international players, and teams is just a few minutes' drive from the airport. The stadium is a 15-20-minute drive from that hotel.

The Sylhet International Cricket Stadium and the adjacent Outer Stadium

known as Ground 2 have 34 wickets altogether, according to organisers. Facilities include an indoor gym, four dressing rooms and a media box able to meet the requirements of international tournaments.

The main venue holds 22,000 and, during yesterday's matches, pulled the crowd in with many making it to the Green Gallery, a specialty of the Sylhet venue.

It raises the question of what more is required to host international fixtures more regularly.



The point of controversy that arose recently regarding Sylhet's accommodation came when Akram Khan, the chairman of facilities, said in an interview that England did not want to play in Sylhet.

"The officials who come to inspect venues look at traveling arrangements and security. They don't show interest in too many venues. We talked to England about Sylhet but they didn't want to play across more than two venues," Akram

said.

"Sylhet had issues with two to three wickets but now Ireland will play here. The England series venue was decided six months back and we wanted Sylhet's wickets to get a little more settled," a BCB high-up told The Daily Star yesterday.

Last year, when Sylhet hosted the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL), the majority of the focus on the tournament was on the tired wickets present at the time. The low bounce especially made for some poor scores, with both players and organisers stating that wickets were below-par. However, much of that changed with a change of curator last year.

Sheikh Mahedi was getting ample turn with his off-spin yesterday while the likes of Azmatullah Omarzai got swing with the new ball. Bounce too was on offer.

"As a venue, Sylhet's facilities are not lacking, but in recent times touring boards have higher demands for accommodation," one BCB source claimed, indicating that accommodation was still an issue for some.

"Maybe we have to ensure seven-star arrangements since five-star is already there," Shafiqul told the media yesterday when asked if there was room for excuse in not choosing Sylhet more often.

Given the nature of the facilities now on offer, few arguments hold water, especially given that making Sylhet more prominent could also help boost tourism, a sector where improvement as a country is possible.

The cricket being played does signal that the wickets are getting better and it is hoped that the venue can entertain more fixtures and sate the locals' appetite.

Sabalenka & Rybakina's winding paths converge

AGENCIES



Saturday's showdown between World No.5 Aryna Sabalenka and reigning Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina will be a primetime showcase of power tennis. From each player's coaching box, the view is the same, which means the margin of victory will come down to who can hold their nerve and their serve.

"Elena is a good rhythm player, so she can feed off the pace of Aryna also," said Stefano Vukov, Rybakina's coach of four years. "I think on the backhand side we are a little bit stronger. I think who serves well tomorrow goes through. That's my feeling."

A year ago, Sabalenka's serve was in pieces and she was having to scrape through fraught battles in Australia as her fragile emotions were laid painfully bare.

Now she stands on the brink of a major breakthrough after finally reaching a Grand Slam final at the fourth attempt.

Sabalenka has won all 10 matches she has contested this season and has not dropped a set, her power game overwhelming opponents and her glass-like fragility firmly in the past.

RYBAKINA		SABALENKA
		
0	Head to Head	3
45	Aces	31
195km/h	Fastest serve	193km/h
26	Break points won	24
80% (156/196)	First serve % won	75% (153/203)
13	Double faults	22
1	Sets dropped	0

The shaky serve that haunted her so badly 12 months ago has been rock-solid, broken just six times in Melbourne.

The volte-face has been reward for a year of hard work with her coaches, a sports psychologist and a biomechanical specialist.

However, Sabalenka feels so in control now that she has dispensed with her sports psychologist.

"To be honest, I decided to stop working with a psychologist. I realised that nobody other than me will help, you know. I'm my own psychologist," she laughed.

Sabalenka said she would not change anything for the final, even if the nerves return.

"I'm not going to do something extra. I think that's OK to feel a little bit nervous," she said.

Sabalenka goes into the match with a 3-0 career record against Rybakina. On paper that would give Sabalenka the edge, but Rybakina's coaching staff, led by Anton Dubrov and physical trainer Jason Stacy, is intent on throwing history out of the window.

"We could say that it was really hard all the time, all the time three sets," Dubrov said. "I think it was just like one break per set almost all the time."

"Right now I would say it's a new match. They played last time at Wimbledon two years ago. I would say it's just like another life. What's happened afterward? Aryna lost her serve. Then she found the serve. Meanwhile, Rybakina won a Slam. They both came here from different directions."

Abahani maintain stranglehold on MSC

SPORTS REPORTER

Six-time champions Abahani once again established their supremacy over archrivals Mohammedan in the Bangladesh Premier League, handing the Black and Whites a 2-0 defeat in their first meeting of the season at the Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta Stadium in Cumilla yesterday.

It was a 15th triumph for Abahani in the 30 clashes with Mohammedan since the introduction of the professional football league in 2007. A fourth win from seven BPL matches this season also helped the Sky Blues close the gap with league leaders Bashundhara Kings, who are three ahead with 18 points. However, the Dhanmondi-based outfit have played a game more than the leaders.

After a 2-2 draw in their previous league match with Sheikh Russel, Abahani knew yesterday's clash would be pivotal to the title race.

Portuguese coach Mario Lemos' charges enjoyed the upper hand from the beginning and came close to taking the lead in the 10th minute but Eleta Kings could only guide his header into the gloves of goalkeeper Ahsan Habib Bipu.

However, Abahani broke the deadlock two minutes later when Nigerian forward Peter Nworah was set up by Daniel Colindres.

Mohammedan, who came into the

match on the back of a 1-1 draw against Sheikh Jamal, began to press more intently but Shahidul Alam Sohel denied Uzbekistan's Mozaffarjon Mozaffarov from a free kick two minutes from the break.

After resumption, Abahani did not stray from their attacking mindset and were rewarded with a second goal in the 58th minute, when Colindres, despite losing his balance, drove home a long throw-in from Rahmat Mia home.

Despite trailing by two goals, Shafiqul Islam Manik's charges never looked like giving up. They launched numerous attacks, the best chance coming when a miscued header from Congolese striker Suleymane Diabate's slipped out of goalkeeper Sohel's hands in the 71st minute. Unfortunately, forward Sajjad Hossain's follow-up floated over.

12 minutes later, Mohammedan found another opportunity but midfielder Manik Mollah disappointingly drove wide from outside the box as his team left with a second defeat in their last three matches, sharply dropping down the table to eighth position with just six points.

In the day's other matches, Muktijoddha Sangsad got their first win with a 2-0 victory over Rahmatganj while newcomers Azampur FC Uttara also secured their first point by playing out a 1-1 draw against Chittagong Abahani.



Paris Saint Germain players, including Lionel Messi, Neymar, and Kylian Mbappe were given a guided tour of the team's future training facilities, which they will begin using from the 2023-2024 season, in Poissy, just a few kilometres away from the current facilities. Nasser Al-Khelaifi, club chairman and CEO, said that the vision was for a training centre that was "modern, at the cutting edge of professionalism and focused on performance and excellence".

PHOTO: PSG