

## Can Tsitsipas upend Djoker's monopoly?

AGENCIES

As Novak Djokovic steps on court to face Stefanos Tsitsipas in Sunday's championship match in Melbourne, one specific statistic from his career may well put him at ease – nine Australian Open finals played, nine Australian Open finals won.

To increase that record to 10 from 10, Djokovic will look to pull through any difficult moments as calmly as he did against Tommy Paul in Friday's semifinal, where he recovered from losing four games in a row in the opening set to seal a 7-5, 6-1, 6-2 victory.

"I'm of course very satisfied and pleased to be in another Grand Slam final," said Djokovic after riding out his rough patch to reach his 10th championship match at the hard-court major. "I mean, this is exactly what I've imagined and hoped that would happen when I came to Australia, with the intention to be in a position to fight for another Australian Open trophy."

"I think that the experience of being in this particular situation and circumstances before helps. I also think the fact that I never lost the Australian Open finals definitely serves as a great confidence booster prior to Sunday."

With a perfect record in Australian Open finals,



Aryna Sabalenka bludgeoned her way to a maiden Grand Slam title at the Australian Open with a 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over Kazakh 22nd seed Elena Rybakina on Saturday in a thrilling final. Sabalenka's 11th straight win of the year propelled the Belarusian back to her career-high ranking of No. 2 behind Iga Swiatek.

PHOTO: AFP

## 'Need few more days to realise what happened'

AFP, Melbourne

An emotional Aryna Sabalenka said it will take a "few more days" to sink in after battling back from a set down to win a maiden Grand Slam title at the Australian Open on Saturday.

The hard-hitting Belarusian collapsed to the court in tears after winning 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 against Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina in a high-quality 2hr 28min arm-wrestle on Rod Laver Arena.

The 24-year-old Sabalenka wiped away tears before getting a warm hug from Moscow-born Rybakina, who played a full part in a thrilling match between two of the most powerful hitters in the women's game.

Sabalenka, the fifth seed and form player in 2023, then ran to her player's box to celebrate with her team.

"Thank you, my team, the craziest team on the tour. We've been through a lot of, I would say, downs last year," Sabalenka said after receiving the trophy. "Thank you so much for what you are doing for me. I love you guys."

Turning to 22nd seed Rybakina, she added: "You're such a great player and of course we are going to have many more battles, hopefully in finals of Grand Slams."

Sabalenka will now rise to second in the world rankings behind Poland's Iga Swiatek, equalling her career high, having triumphed in her first Grand Slam final.

"I need a few more days to realise what just happened," Sabalenka told Australia's Channel Nine. "Oh my god, I'm speechless. I was super emotional at the end."

The final – a fitting ending to two weeks of drama and shocks at Melbourne Park – was a match of brutal groundstrokes, precision serving and wonderful rallies from two players at the top of their game.

Rybakina cruised through the first set in 34 minutes but Sabalenka scrapped her way back in a 57-minute second set to take it to a nervy decider.

It was then a case of which of the big servers would blink first in a toe-to-toe battle.

At 3-3 Rybakina – who represents Kazakhstan – could not find enough first serves and though she saved two break points, a third was too much, and Sabalenka had the finish line in sight.

Another ace took her to 5-3 but the 23-year-old Rybakina held to force Sabalenka to test her nerves and serve for the championship. She was up to the challenge, but needed four nerve-shredding match points after a display where she hit 51 winners and 17 aces.

"I just kept telling myself that nobody said this is going to be easy. She's going to fight, this is the final, just work for it," Sabalenka said afterwards, describing how she got through those four match points. "Take a deep breath and just work," added Sabalenka, who had reached three Grand Slam semifinals before this year but never gone farther.



DJOKOVIC	HEAD TO HEAD	TSITSIPAS
10		2
59	Aces	69
35	Break pts won	25
50	Games dropped	80
1	Sets dropped	3

Djokovic's confidence will be soaring – more so as he bids to equal Rafael Nadal's Grand Slam record and return to world number one.

While Djokovic is into a record 33rd Grand Slam final and eyeing to equal Nadal's 22 major crowns, the Greek third seed will play only his second.

Adding spice to the showdown, the winner will become world number one, dethroning Spanish teenager Carlos Alcaraz.

That is added incentive for Djokovic, who last held the top ranking in June.

"Winning Grand Slams and being the number one in the world are probably the two biggest peaks that you can climb as a professional tennis player," the 35-year-old said.

"I know his [Tsitsipas] game pretty well. He knows my game well. I know what's ahead of me, and I'm excited. Fortunately for me at this stage of my career, because of all the achievements, it is always basically every match or every tournament there is always something on the line, particularly when the Grand Slams are played," Djokovic said.

In Tsitsipas's only previous Grand Slam final, at Roland Garros in 2021, he fell to Djokovic in five sets after holding a 2-0 lead.

But the 24-year-old believes he has matured as a player and a person and is now better suited to the big stage in his quest to become the first Greek player to win a Grand Slam title.

"I couldn't be more ready for this moment," said Tsitsipas, the youngest man to reach the Melbourne final since a 23-year-old Djokovic in 2011.

"This is a very humbling opportunity for me, being in the finals here means a lot. Having started here as one of my first junior Grand Slams and being now in the finals of the men's event is as important as my very first steps that I took on the tennis court. I'm going to grasp this opportunity."

## 'The game dictates how I coach the players'

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI from Sylhet

Julian Wood is known as somewhat of a pioneer in coaching T20 power-hitting. This time, he is enjoying a stint with Chattogram Challengers as head coach. His overall work with England furthered his reputation as a pioneer in the industry. The current Chattogram coach spoke to *The Daily Star's* Abdullah Al Mehdi about his work with England, his philosophy and the evolution taking place in cricket through T20s.

**The Daily Star (DS):** What entails the power-hitting philosophy?

**Julian Wood (JW):** Everybody is different but it was quite hand-dominant back in the day. If you look at the grip, it's tailored to roll the wrist, then you lead with the head to get on top of the ball and it's all tailored to keep the ball down. Then T20 came along and there was more emphasis on ball stroking and the language changed. The language I used changed in the way I coached. I had to be more aggressive because the game is dictating how you coach. The way I see it, you won't have batting coaches, you will have hitting coaches.

You still have to bat, but you have power players and then skill players. I look at the player first. I see Afif [Hossain] as a brilliant player, he's classy with skill and touch. He's got



enough power but what he must not do is what he did a few games ago when he tried to power it.

**DS:** Your take on England's philosophy and evolution?

**JW:** They made a decision in 2015 when they were knocked out of the World Cup [by Bangladesh]. I worked with England before 2015 and I was in no doubt they would be knocked out because they had red-ball players playing white-ball cricket. They got Trevor Bayliss and Eoin Morgan, who I think is fantastic as a leader. Then they started getting the right personnel and I was lucky to be part of it. I was there only for power-hitting, not batting coach, because they had Graham Thorpe, who is very good.

**DS:** How can Bangladesh or other nations replicate that?

**JW:** You have to look at your players

and that's why the BPL is so good for local players because it's like a shop window. It's an opportunity to see these guys and say 'this guy can do a job here' and then you need the right personnel working with them.

**DS:** Your thoughts on working with the Bangladesh team?

**JW:** Last year there was a lot of talk about whether I would work in Bangladesh. Of course, I would. I am open to every role, but I think what they need to improve on is power-hitting.

**DS:** Does Bangladesh have that potential?

**JW:** They are not big guys but that doesn't matter because it's how you use your body that matters. Small guys can hit big sixes and there are certain mechanics and technical aspects you need to teach differently compared to guys who are 6 feet four inches. The smaller guys need more skill.

**DS:** How was your experience working with Punjab in the IPL?

**JW:** Jonty [Rhodes] is a top Punjab man and he called me when I was here. He asked if I was in the IPL and when I said I wasn't, he said that Punjab would pick me. He got me to Punjab. The quality of the IPL is unbelievable due to the players' quality. You win games you thought you could never win. They also have a lot of data to use, like measures of bat speed. It's information. If you change the angle just four degrees with your bat, suddenly the impact is 12 percent quicker.

## Kings make it 7 in 7

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings extended their winning streak to seven BPL games, breezing to a 3-1 win over Sheikh Russel at the Bashundhara Kings Arena while newcomers Fortis FC played out a 1-1 draw against Bangladesh Police at the Shaheed Smriti Stadium in Rajshahi yesterday.

Kings consolidated their lead at the top of the table with 21 points – six more than second placed Abahani – while Police FC and Fortis raised their tally to nine and seven points respectively.

Kings were held to a stalemate for 65 minutes before their star, Brazilian forward Robson De Silva, broke the deadlock from the spot before Asror Gafurov doubled the margin in the 73rd minute.

Sheikh Russel's Nigerian forward Sunday Udoh raised hopes with an 82nd-minute strike but Robson sealed the match with a stoppage-time strike from a free kick.

## Koly shoots her way into historic final

SPORTS REPORTER

Kamrun Nahar Koly became the first Bangladeshi shooter to qualify for the finals of the women's 10m Air Rifle event in the ISSF World Cup, but the promising shooter had to be content with an eighth-placed finish in the shootout in Jakarta yesterday.

Koly – who had made history by recording the best score by a Bangladeshi shooter in the qualification round of the same event by scoring 629.2 out of 654 during the ISSF World Championships in Cairo in October 2022 – scored 228.4 in the qualification round to finish sixth among 53 shooters.

However, the 22-year-old from Narayangaj could not shine quite as brightly in the eight-shooter final round and was eliminated from the third round. Eszter Meszaros from Hungary and Aneta Stankiewicz from Poland qualified for the gold-medal match, where Meszaros triumphed.

Koly's teammates – Shaira Arefin, Nafisa Tabassum and Sajida Haque – finished 15th, 16th and 31st in the qualification round of the same event, scoring 626.5, 626.5 and 623 respectively.



Both England skipper Grace Scrivens and India captain Shafali Verma wear broad smiles as they pose with the ICC Women's Under-19 T20 World Cup at Senwes Park in Potchefstroom on Saturday. The two sides will battle it out in the final of the inaugural edition of the tournament at the same venue today.

PHOTO: ICC