



I am born a champion, says Tsitsipas

REUTERS, Melbourne

Stefanos Tsitsipas dreamed of holding the Australian Open trophy aloft after nodding off on the eve of Sunday's final but Novak Djokovic ended up giving the confident Greek a rude awakening.

In a rematch of the 2021 French Open decider, Tsitsipas lost 6-3 7-6(4) 7-6(5) as the Serbian claimed a record-extending 10th Australian Open and 22nd Grand Slam title to match Rafa Nadal.

Though falling short again in his goal of becoming Greece's first Grand Slam champion and world number one, Tsitsipas was philosophical in defeat.

"Of course, I was dreaming about the trophy, lifting that trophy. I even dreamt it last night in my sleep," the 24-year-old told reporters.

"The desire is really there. I really, really want it badly. But just dreaming about it won't make it happen. You got to act.

"Losing finals is not the best feeling in the world, for sure.

"But definitely much better playing finals than being stuck behind in the semi-finals."

Despite a fine fortnight at Melbourne Park, third seed Tsitsipas was short of his best in the final, though loath to admit it.

Djokovic praised Tsitsipas as "the greatest" to hold a racket in his runner-up speech.

He was similarly effusive in his news conference, saying the 35-year-old Serb had made him a much better player.

"Getting our asses kicked is for sure a very good lesson every single time," he said.

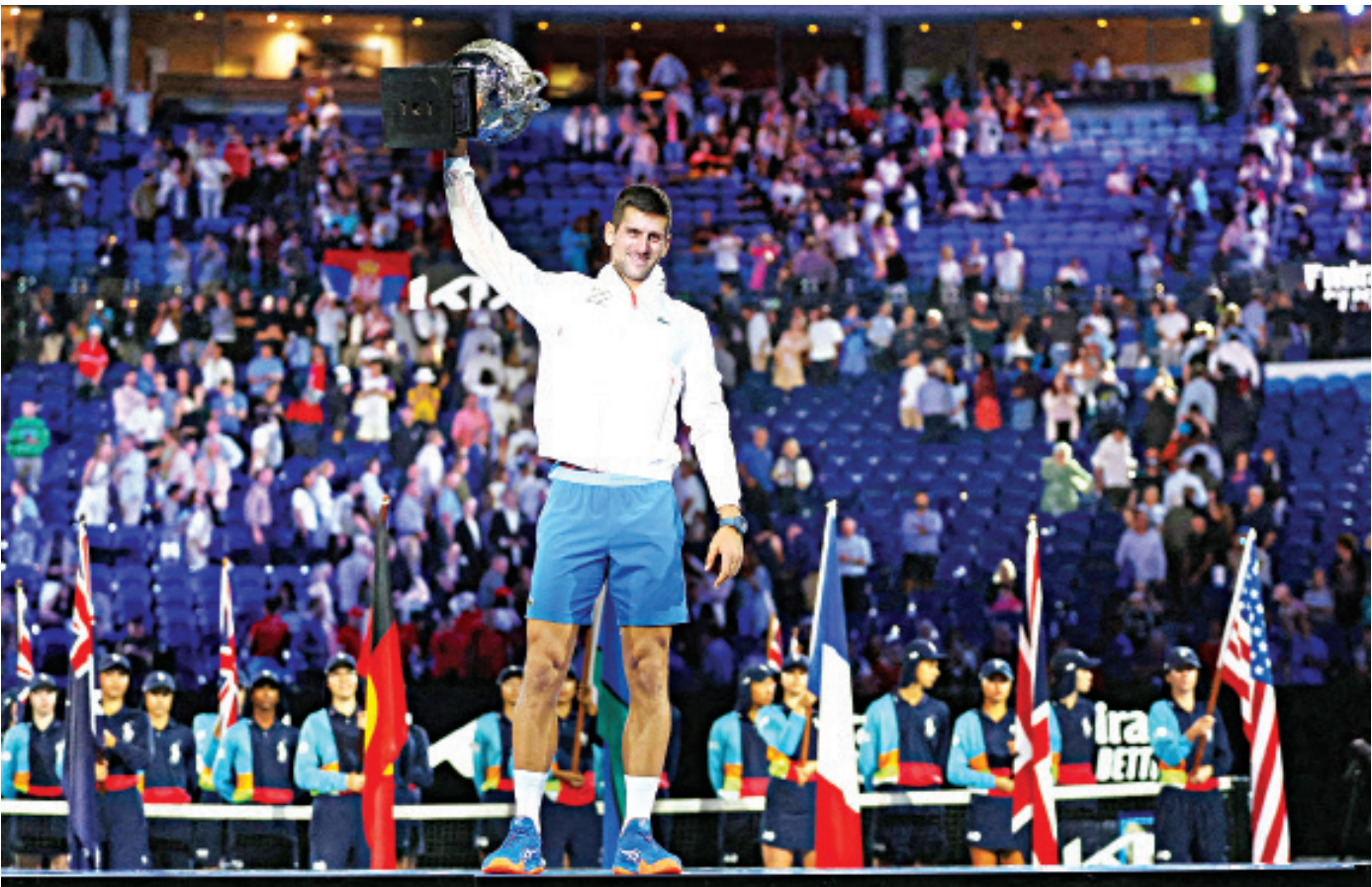
"I find it a very important part of my career, to have a player like him that will help me grow better and do bigger things."

At 24, Tsitsipas has his career ahead of him and can hope for clear air eventually when the likes of Djokovic and Nadal hang up their rackets.

While admitting he needs to improve certain things about his game, confidence is unlikely to be one of them.

"I don't see any reason to be lowering my expectations or my goals. I am born a champion," he said.

"I can feel it in my blood. I can feel it as a competitive kid that I was when I was young. It's something that is within me."



Novak Djokovic poses with the Australian Open trophy following his straight-sets victory over Stefanos Tsitsipas in the men's singles final in Melbourne on Sunday. (Inset) The now record-equalling Grand Slam winner celebrates with his team and relatives including his mother Dijana Djokovic and coach Goran Ivanisevic following the match.

PHOTO: REUTERS/AFP

'Biggest victory in my life'

REUTERS, Melbourne

Novak Djokovic said his win over Stefanos Tsitsipas in Sunday's Australian Open final was the "biggest victory" of his career, as he claimed his 22nd Grand Slam title and won back the hearts of the home fans a year after being deported from the country.

Having arrived in Australia unvaccinated 12 months ago, the 10-times Melbourne champion was deported amid a backlash from angry Australians who had endured some of the world's toughest lockdowns as COVID-19 infections surged.

But the Serbian's woes are now well behind him and his 6-3, 7-6(4), 7-6(5) victory over Tsitsipas was met with thunderous applause from a packed crowd at Rod Laver Arena.

"I have to say that this has been one of the most challenging tournaments I have played in my life, considering the circumstances," Djokovic said in his on-court interview.

"Not playing last year, coming back this year. I want to thank all the people that made me feel welcome and comfortable to be in Melbourne, Australia.

"I try to pinch myself and



Djokovic's Grand Slam titles

Australian Open: 10 (2008, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023)
Wimbledon: 7 (2011, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022)
US Open: 3 (2011, 2015, 2018)
French Open: 2 (2016, 2021)

Most Grand Slam wins

22 - Rafael Nadal (ESP), Novak Djokovic (SRB)
20 - Roger Federer (SUI)
14 - Pete Sampras (USA)
12 - Roy Emerson (AUS)
11 - Rod Laver (AUS), Bjorn Borg (SWE)
10 - Bill Tilden (USA)

really live through these moments and it's a long journey... Only the team and family knows what we have been through in the last four

to five weeks. This, probably, is the biggest victory in my life considering the circumstances."

In a rematch of the 2021 French Open decider, 24-year-

old Tsitsipas was unable to convert the few chances he had as he failed to stop Djokovic winning his 22nd Grand Slam title.

"Tough luck tonight, great battle. This is definitely not your last Grand Slam, you still have a lot of time, much more than me," Djokovic said.

"I would also like to congratulate your family and your team... You are one of the most professional tennis players that I know on the tour, and one of the most interesting guys."

Tsitsipas, who fell short of becoming the first Greek tennis player to win a Grand Slam, commended Djokovic's contribution to the sport.

"I have had the privilege to play a lot of high intensity matches, but I would like to say one more time that Novak brings the best out of me and these are the matches I have been working my entire life for," Tsitsipas said.

"He is one of the greatest in our sport and I think he is the greatest that has ever held the tennis racket.

"I would like to thank you for pushing our sport so far and it deserves a player like you who pushes every single player who is involved in this sport."

England bypass warm-ups to trim tour duration

SPORTS REPORTER from Sylhet

Although the England cricket team were set to play two warm-up games in Sylhet ahead of their two white-ball series in March against hosts Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) informed that England have decided to shorten the tour duration by skipping practice matches.

"They [England] were satisfied with the venues. We have hosted ICC and ACC events before and we have the facilities to successfully host England. We have a few plans and visiting teams also have a few requirements, and we consider everything before selecting the venues. We had a practice-match scheduled which we arranged in Sylhet but ultimately England limited their tour to official matches only so it won't happen this time around," BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury told the media yesterday.

As per initial itinerary, England were to play practice matches on February 24 and February 26. Instead, however, England will now arrive on February 24. The BCB CEO informed that the board is planning accordingly.

The first two of the three-match ODI series are scheduled to take place at Dhaka's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium on March 1 and March 3 before Chattogram's Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium hosts the final ODI on March 6. Chattogram will then feature the first two T20Is on March 9 and 12 before the final T20I takes place at Dhaka on March 14.

Sylhet International Cricket Stadium is ready for international action but over the past few years the BCB has not scheduled international fixtures regularly at the ground, leading to disappointment from Sylhet-based organisers.

"We are hosting Ireland in Sylhet, so this is not a fact that we are not using that venue. We want to use every venue at different times," he said.

Sylhet's picturesque stadium is currently hosting the BPL and the accommodation arrangement is in place for international teams. Organisers in Sylhet believe the ground is being ignored as an international venue despite having key facilities. It remains to be seen whether important series are hosted in future at the venue.

The national team, meanwhile, is currently without a head coach and Chandika Hathurusingha's name had surfaced in the media as the leading candidate to take on the role. The BCB CEO, however, did not want to discuss any names at the given moment but hoped that before the England series begins, they will be able to secure the coaching appointments.

"We never mentioned any specific names and, in fact, we can't do that as well. We remain hopeful of filling the coaching position before the England series," the BCB CEO added.

This will be England's first tour of Bangladesh since 2016, where they drew the two-Test series 1-1 and won the ODI series 2-1.



Girls eye SAFF U-20 title

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh had once been an intimidating force in the age-group women's football competitions in the South Asian region following the emergence of several talented players, who delivered the maiden trophy of SAFF Women's Championship last year after winning the titles of SAFF U-18 and U-19 Women's Championship in 2018 and 2021, respectively.

With all those players having risen up in ranks to represent the senior women's team, the upcoming crop of players are eager to scale the heights set by their seniors. Bangladesh U-20 women's football team, thus, have kept their sights on bagging the trophy of upcoming SAFF Women's Championship, beginning from February 3 at Kamnalapur's Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium.

"Our preparation has been good for the last one month. Besides, we have also played two international tournaments. So, we are looking forward to give our best in the [SAFF] Championship in front of a home crowd," said Bangladesh captain Shamsunnahar at an official press conference at the BFF House yesterday.

"As we have been together for a long time, we have good



BANGLADESH FIXTURES

3 Feb
Nepal vs Bangladesh
– 5:00pm
5 Feb
Bangladesh vs India
– 5:00pm
7 Feb
Bangladesh vs Bhutan
– 5:00pm
9 Feb Final - 6:00pm

understanding among us. We are also hopeful to deliver something good by lifting the trophy at home," said Shamsunnahar, who also plays as a striker for the senior women's team and will have national goalkeeper Rupna Chakma as company in the U-20 squad.

Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan will initially play the round-

robin league matches before the top two teams advance to the final, slated for February 9.

Head coach Golam Rabbani Choton reckons his charges are in good shape ahead of the tournament.

"The good thing was that all of the players have been in the Women's Football league before coming into the training camp, which began on January 1. Since then, they have been working hard to put up a good performance. I think they are ready for the Championship," said Choton, adding their opponents would be tough as they performed well during the SAFF U-18 Women's Championship held in India's Jamshedpur in March last year.

"However, we are going to take part in the tournament as favourites, as we had been before. Our target is to win the tournament," he added.

Despite securing nine points alongside the eventual champions India in the 2022 SAFF U-18 Women's Championship, Bangladesh had to be satisfied with a second-place finish on virtue of goal difference.

Mahfuza Akhtar Kiron, the chairman of BFF women's committee, and BFF vice-president Ataur Rahman Bhuiyan Manik hoped the girls in red and green would be able to progress match by match and triumph like how the senior team did in Nepal last year.



India players celebrate the dismissal of an England batter during the final of the inaugural ICC Women's U-19 T20 World Cup in Potchefstroom yesterday. India won the final by seven wickets, chasing down a 69-run target with six overs to spare.

PHOTO: ICC