

Giant-killing Muchova in Swiatek’s way

AFP, Paris

Reigning French Open champion Iga Swiatek will attempt to become the first woman to successfully defend the title in Paris in 16 years on Saturday when she faces surprise finalist Karolina Muchova.

World number one Swiatek is bidding for a third Roland Garros crown in four years – which would see her join an exclusive club of three-time winners including Serena Williams and Monica Seles – and fourth Grand Slam title following her 2022 US Open victory.

Justine Henin was the last woman to win back-to-back French Open titles when she captured her third in a row and fourth in total in 2007.

Swiatek, 22, has yet to drop a set in this tournament but will be wary of her Czech opponent who knocked out second seed Aryna Sabalenka in the semifinals after recovering from 2-5 and match point down in the final set.

Swiatek’s last-four win over Beatriz Haddad Maia of Brazil coupled with Sabalenka’s agonising defeat ensured the Pole will remain at number one heading into the grass-court part of the season.

She is the youngest woman since Monica Seles in the early 1990s to reach three French Open finals, while world number 43 Muchova

Muchova		Swiatek
12h 4 mins	Time on court	7h 41 mins
143	Games Played	89
2	Sets dropped	0
175	Winners	120
12	Aces	7
65%	1st serve win %	69%
29/63	Break Points won	29/39



is the fourth lowest ranked player to reach the showpiece match here.

It is still early in her career but Swiatek is starting to establish a dominance at Roland Garros best associated with Rafael Nadal, the record 14-time French Open champion.

“Rafa, what he did and what he’s still doing, it’s pretty amazing,” said Swiatek. “I never kind of knew that it’s gonna be possible for me.

With a 27-2 record at Roland Garros, Swiatek will be the overwhelming favourite, but Muchova has won all five matches in her career against players in the top three – four of them at Grand Slams.

“It’s nice. I didn’t really even know about this statistic. It just shows me that I can play against them,” said the 26-year-old.

She came from a set down to beat top-ranked Ashleigh Barty in the quarterfinals at the 2021 Australian Open, showing she has a knack of rising to the occasion in a career slowed by injuries.

It will be the fifth French Open in a row featuring a first-time Grand Slam finalist and just the second time Swiatek has played Muchova.

Their only previous meeting came in Prague in 2019 when Muchova won in three sets against Swiatek, who had come through qualifying to reach the main draw.

“I really like her game, honestly. I really respect her, and she’s like a player who can do anything,” said Swiatek. “She has great touch. And she has a great technique.”



Novak Djokovic reached his seventh French Open final in dramatic circumstances on Friday when world number one Carlos Alcaraz (inset) suffered “whole body” cramping and intense tension which torpedoed his challenge.

PHOTO: REUTERS/AFP



Eleta, Sazzad exclusions raise eyebrows

SPORTS REPORTER

Spanish coach Javier Cabrera yesterday vowed to take Bangladesh to the semifinals of the upcoming SAFF Championship after surprisingly dropping striker Eleta Kingsley and in-form forward Sazzad Hossain as he announced his final 23-member squad for the regional football extravaganza, set to begin from June 21 in Bengaluru.

In their stead, the 38-year-old named two fresh players in the form of attacking midfielder Sheikh Morsalin and winger Rafiqul Islam in the squad, which will remain unchanged for a FIFA-sanctioned friendly against Cambodia on June 15 as part of their preparations for the SAFF Championship. The booters will leave for Phnom Penh today.

However, the decision to leave out two in-form strikers and instead opt for Suman Reza raised questions about the selection process, especially considering that the Bashundhara Kings forward got little match time in domestic competitions this season and failed to score a single goal over 10 league matches.

“Suman is a player who has the capacity and quality to contribute to what we are trying to do and the idea we want to develop. We made the decision that was best for the team. Right now Suman can provide more to the team. It’s nothing against Eleta and Sazzad. That is the situation. It was a tough list to make. Suman is ahead of

the other strikers,” Cabrera explained.

Nigeria-born Kingsley, who made his international debut for Bangladesh against Seychelles last March, was the top-scoring local player this season, netting eight times for Abahani in the Bangladesh Premier League and once in the Federation Cup. Sazzad also had good performances for Mohammedan in the league, striking three goals.

Replying to a query, Cabrera confidently said: “The team will manage to score.”



Apart from Eleta and Sazzad’s exclusion, Cabrera was forced to drop defenders Rimon Hossain and Tutul Hossain Badsha due to injury, which leaves the backline looking a bit vulnerable as Bangladesh attempt to reach the semifinals after five consecutive failed attempts to do so.

Those omissions left Cabrera’s side with a relatively inexperienced defence, with only Bishwanath Ghosh, Rahmat

Mia, Tariq Raihan Kazi and Tapu Barman, who is still recovering from a hamstring injury, the only experienced campaigners among the squad’s seven defenders.

“Some important players like Rimon and Badsha are not in the squad due to injuries so we called up other players who have had enough playing time and have been with us before like Isa Faisal. We have full confidence in the performance of these players and are convinced we can perform well and will perform well,” Cabrera added.

To reach the semifinals, Bangladesh must win at least two of their three matches in Group B, which also features the Maldives, Bhutan and the tournament’s top-ranked side, Lebanon.

“Obviously, Lebanon are quite a strong team in terms of ranking and physical condition, but we believe in our capacity to compete against them. If we want to go to the semifinals, we must win games. It is absolutely difficult because the Maldives are a higher-ranked side and may be more favoured than us, but we are convinced we can beat them,” said Cabrera.

Captain Jamal Bhuiyan said: “As there are two new teams, the competition will be a bit greater but I think every championship is different. It’s going to be a challenge again. The last time we were so close [to playing the final] and of course, we want to be in the same situation but we want to reach the semifinals first.”

Djokovic eyes No. 23 as Alcaraz breaks down

REUTERS, Paris

Novak Djokovic made a huge leap towards a record 23rd Grand Slam title with a 6-3, 5-7, 6-1, 6-1 French Open semifinal victory against an ailing Carlos Alcaraz in a clash of titans that ended in anticlimactic fashion on Friday.

World No. 1 Alcaraz had just levelled the contest when disaster struck as he limped to his bench holding his right leg at 1-1 in the third set. But Djokovic was merciless, dropping only one of 12 games to book a spot for Sunday’s showdown against Casper Ruud or German Alexander Zverev.

“It’s been really tough for me, honestly. I disappointed myself honestly in a match like this,” said Alcaraz. “The first set and the second set were really, really intense and I started to cramp in my arm. At the beginning of the third set I started to cramp every part of my body, not only the legs. The arms, as well, every part of the legs.”



AUSSIES in control at the Oval

REUTERS, London

Pat Cummins produced a vicious bowling onslaught to leave India battered and bruised as Australia took a 296-run lead on day three of the World Test Championship (WTC) final at The Oval on Friday.

Australia’s four-man pace attack claimed nine wickets between them to dismiss India for 296 in their first innings, with captain Cummins picking up three scalps.

Australia will resume day four on 123 for four in their second innings with Marnus Labuschagne batting on 41 along with Cameron Green on seven.

Earlier, Ajinkya Rahane blocked out the drama engulfing his team mates at the other end of the pitch as he top scored for India with 89, while Shardul Thakur survived some painful hits to his arm to contribute 51.

After a dismal showing on day two when India were left hanging on at 151-5 in response to Australia’s first innings total of 469, the morning session got off to a painful start for the world’s top-ranked team.

Fans were still filing into the ground in their thousands when fast bowler Scott Boland produced a ferocious delivery to dislodge KS Bharat’s stumps with the second ball of the day.

As Bharat departed for five, India trailed the Australians by 317 runs and were left facing a monumental challenge to avoid following on.

Injury concerns ahead of AFGHANISTAN TEST

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh have a few injury worries to deal with as the one-off Test against Afghanistan approaches. ODI captain Tamim Iqbal and stand-in Test skipper Liton Das are battling with back issues. However, the injuries are not of an acute nature.

Tamim was rested on Thursday owing to a recurring back pain. Practice was foiled due to rain and the Tigers got an extra day’s rest on Friday. Afghanistan are due in the country today and both teams will check in at the team hotel.

Tamim’s back pain resurfaced after a few practice sessions during the preliminary camp of the national team.

“Tamim is undergoing rest today (Friday) and we will see him again tomorrow (Saturday). If he has pain, he will have to rest,” the chief physician of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB),



Debashish Chowdhury, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Bangladesh’s match against Afghanistan will begin on June 14 while practice is set to commence from Sunday, June 11. Tamim’s current condition is yet to make him uncertain for the Afghanistan Test.

“It’s no use talking about if he (Tamim) is uncertain for the match this early,” Debashish further informed.

Tamim missed the series against India last year due to a groin injury but

returned for the one-day series against England before also playing both the home and away ODI series against Ireland.

Meanwhile Liton, captain for the one-off Test against Afghanistan in Shakib Al Hasan’s absence, is facing a back issue and has not attended training since June 6. He had also been suffering from fever.

“Liton, or anyone else, does not have an acute injury. Liton’s issue is related to back pain. There are a few injuries and we are working on those. Overall, the team is ok,” Debashish added.

Taskin Ahmed, too, is looking to meet his workload quota ahead of the Test, although he has been declared medically fit.

The BCB have introduced GPS trackers from this series, so that keeping a tab on players’ workload after returning from a forced break due to injury will be more efficient.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina hands over the prize money to Union Bank, the winners of the inaugural Sheikh Hasina Inter Bank Football Tournament 2023, organised by the Bangladesh Association of Banks (BAB). Union Bank beat Al-Arafah Islami Bank 2-1 in the final at Army Stadium yesterday.