

Ruthless Djokovic returns to the top

REUTERS, New York

Novak Djokovic made a winning return to the U.S. Open by storming past Frenchman Alexandre Muller 6-0, 6-2, 6-3 on Monday to reclaim the world number one ranking and take the first step towards matching Margaret Court's record haul of 24 Grand Slams.

Unable to play at last year's event due to being unvaccinated against COVID-19, Djokovic had not been seen on the Flushing Meadows hard courts since his loss to Daniil Medvedev in the 2021 final.

And fans let the 36-year-old know they had missed him, showering the Serb with applause as he emerged from the tunnel onto Arthur Ashe Stadium court.

It was clear that the three-time champion had missed them as well as he embraced the cheers of a record crowd of over 30,000 that included former-U.S. President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle.

"I was excited to go out on the court, it has been a couple of years so to come in front of you guys is always a pleasure," Djokovic told the New York crowd. "Thanks for coming out and thanks to all the people who stayed to almost 1 a.m.."

"Night sessions at Arthur Ashe are always something special."

Arriving in New York on the back of an absorbing win over his young rival Carlos Alcaraz in the Cincinnati Open final, an in-form Djokovic showed the 84th ranked Muller no mercy in what was his U.S. Open main draw debut.

Firing on all cylinders, Djokovic broke the overwhelmed Frenchman to open the match and never took his foot off the gas, closing out the first set in 23 minutes with a thundering ace.

Djokovic broke Muller for a fourth time to open the second set and went 2-0 up before his opponent held serve for the first time, raising both hands in triumph as the crowd roared.

But the cheers would be few and far between as Djokovic closed out the second with a wicked forehand.

Muller showed more ambition in the third, taking the set to 3-3 before Djokovic took control by breaking the Frenchman twice on the way to closing out the match.

"I couldn't serve well in the second and third, I dropped the level of my serve and had to work for my points a bit more," said Djokovic. "Nevertheless I think I played great from the beginning to the end."

"Some hiccups but I liked the level and hopefully I can maintain it in the next round as well."

While the U.S. Open has just got underway, Djokovic's win guarantees he will nudge Alcaraz out of top spot when the world rankings are updated on Sept. 11.

Next up for number two seed Djokovic is Spain's Bernabe Zapata Miralles, who was a straight sets winner over American Ethan Quinn.

Meanwhile, women's world number one Iga Swiatek and American rival Coco Gauff advanced to the second round.

Djokovic's arrival on court had been delayed after a gruelling three-set battle between American teenager Gauff and Germany's Laura Siegemund in the preceding night game.

The 19-year-old Gauff, tipped by many as the biggest threat to defending US Open champion Swiatek, was forced to dig deep before winning 3-6, 6-2, 6-4 in 2hr 50min.

In other women's games on Monday, defending champion Swiatek needed less than hour to defeat Sweden's Rebecca Peterson 6-0, 6-1.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic plays a backhand return against France's Alexandre Muller during their US Open men's singles first round at Flushing Meadows in New York City on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Almutairi wants to break 'bad luck' against Bangladesh

SPORTS REPORTER

Afghanistan football team's head coach Abdullah Almutairi is looking forward to breaking the deadlock against Bangladesh in next month's two FIFA friendly matches.

Bangladesh have played three matches against the Afghans on home soil and are yet to lose against the central Asian nation. Two of those matches were during the 1980 Asia Cup qualifiers and the other a friendly match in 2015, however, Afghanistan have a better overall record against Bangladesh, with two wins in eight matches.

The first of the two friendlies will take place on September 4 and the second one three days later, both at the Bashundhara Kings Arena.

"It is not important to win or lose in friendly matches. The important thing is that we have come here to prepare for the World Cup pre-qualifiers against Mongolia. What is the benefit if we win the friendly match and lose the qualifying fixture?" Almutairi opined, after the team's first training session at the Army Police Ground on Monday.

The 41-year-old coach, however, said that he would be happy with a win on Bangladesh soil.

"I believe Bangladesh are a more effective team now. Don't look at

the ranking which is something that doesn't work always. Faroe Islands are better than 50 percent Asian teams but they never scored one goal in European Qualifiers. Ranking is not important, the important thing is the performance on the ground. I think we will have to face difficulty against Bangladesh. We need to break bad luck because we never beat Bangladesh in Bangladesh. So I will be happy if we can break the bad luck," said the coach.



Afghanistan came here with a full-strength side, bringing their 10 of their foreign-based players. However, Almutairi hinted that he might not use all of them against Bangladesh in a bid to keeping their World Cup pre-qualifiers opponents Mongolia in dark.

"I think the number [of foreign-based players] is 10 who are from Germany, Georgia, Australia, Netherlands and other countries.

We will hide our weapons for the Mongolia match because it is only a friendly match," said Almutairi.

The Kuwaiti also admitted that Bangladesh improved a lot under the guidance of Javier Cabrera.

"I think they have improved a lot. Now they have a stable tactic. They have bettered their performance. If Jamal (Bhuiyan) comes from Argentina, then we know how they will play. And if Jamal doesn't come, we know how they will play. We are waiting for Jamal because

all tactic [of Bangladesh] revolves around him. We also know they are very good in one situation and one tactic, so I don't think they will change it to surprise us," said Almutairi, who had previously guided Nepal to a 1-1 draw against Bangladesh in the 2021 SAFF Championship in Maldives.

Jamal is scheduled to land early this morning and join the national team camp later in the day.

Onana recalled to Cameroon squad

REUTERS, Yaounde

Manchester United's new goalkeeper Andre Onana has been recalled to Cameroon's squad some nine months after he walked out on the team during the World Cup in Qatar.

Onana was named on Tuesday by coach Rigobert Song in the squad for the Africa Cup of Nations qualifier against Burundi in Garoua on Sept. 12, where the Indomitable Lions need only a draw to guarantee a place at January's finals in the Ivory Coast.

Onana, 27, left the Cameroon squad in Qatar last November after their opening group game against Switzerland following a dispute with Song over tactics and training.

The Cameroon Football Federation said he was suspended and had been sent home and he has not played for the country since, having announced his retirement from international football. But on Tuesday at a press conference in Yaounde, Song denied there had been a problem with Onana and said it was natural that as the best available goalkeeper he was in the squad.

U-16 boys aim to regain SAFF title

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh, the champions 2015 and 2018 editions, are set to fly today for Thimphu to take part in the SAFF U-16 Championship with the hope of regaining the title.

The boys in red and green, however, will have to first get out of the group, which also features two of the strongest sides of the region -- India and Nepal. The top two sides will advance to the semifinals of the six-team competition, which has so far been held six times, from the age-group of U-15 to U-17.

The first two editions of the competition were among under-16 teams, with winning the second edition in Sylhet in 2015, beating India 4-2 in shootout in the final. The championship then turned an under-15 affair for the next three editions from 2017 to 2019, with Bangladesh beating Pakistan 3-2 in shootout to win the trophy in 2018.

However, Bangladesh could not progress to the knockout stage in the next two editions in 2019 and 2022, with the last one held as a competition among under-17 teams.



"I have played in age-group tournaments and I know how hard these are. That's why the boys have been working hard for a long time and we are confident that they will play better than the past," head coach Saifur Rahman Moni said at an official press briefing at the BFF House yesterday.

"We are confident since we have six to seven players with experience of playing in the Bangladesh championship League. So, we don't see any reason not to be optimistic about winning the title," said the former national forward, who trained his team for only two weeks.

'Baby AB' steps onto int'l stage

AFP, Durban

Dewald Brevis will take a step onto cricket's big stage during Australia's white-ball tour of South Africa, which starts with the first of three Twenty20 internationals at Kingsmead on Wednesday.

Brevis, 20, was nicknamed 'Baby AB' for the way he modelled his game on that of retired South African star AB de Villiers.

He wears the same number 17 on his shirt and has the ability to hit big sixes, particularly in the area between midwicket and long on.

He slammed a South African T20 record score of 162 off 57 balls in a domestic match last October.

Brevis is expected to make his international debut in the T20 series and will need to live up to the early hype about his career to secure a ticket to the 50-overs Cricket World Cup in India in October and November.

Brevis is part of an 18-man squad for a five-match one-day international series which follows the T20s. Only 15 players will go to the World Cup.

Buttler welcomes 'superstar' Stokes back into ODI fold

AFP, London

England limited-overs captain Jos Buttler hailed "superstar" Ben Stokes following his decision to come out of one-day international retirement.

Stokes called time on his 50-over career last year due to concerns over his punishing workload and a knee problem.

However, the England Test skipper announced his intention to play ODI cricket again earlier this month and has been named in the squad for the upcoming series against New Zealand, with the World Cup in India looming in October.

England, world champions in both white-ball formats, play the Black Caps in four T20s and four ODIs and Buttler admitted he was "delighted" to have Stokes back in the fold.

"It's excellent news on all fronts, said Buttler. "It's great for cricket to have a superstar like Ben Stokes in a World Cup."

"You want to see those players in those major showpiece events so it's fantastic that he's made himself available."

"When a player of that calibre is available again it's a no-brainer really that you want them back in your team."

Stokes played a pivotal role in England's 2019 World Cup triumph, scoring an



unbeaten 84 in the final against New Zealand before starring in the Super Over alongside Buttler.

"You look at the impact he has in every game he plays really, but especially in the

last couple of World Cups (including the 2022 T20 World Cup), he's the man in the middle with the crucial moment," said Buttler.

"We're delighted to have him back. It's

not just the cricket but everything else he brings to the group."

All-rounder Stokes, 32, will be returning to the ODI squad as a specialist batter and Buttler said he made his decision following the conclusion of the recent Ashes series, which ended 2-2.

"He said he'd be available as a batter and that was enough for me to just say 'brilliant, can't wait to have you back'," said Buttler.

England open the 20-over section of the New Zealand series at Chester-le-Street on Wednesday.

The first ODI takes place in Cardiff on September 8.

Although England have one eye on the World Cup later this year, Buttler is looking forward to a "great test" against the Black Caps.

"It's great to be back together as a squad having not played together since Bangladesh in March," he said.

"It's very exciting stuff on the horizon obviously with the World Cup in India, but we start with the T20 series here against New Zealand which we're determined to do well in."

"Of course I suppose the main priority is the ODIs against New Zealand -- I think they'll be a great test for us ahead of the World Cup."