

## Melbourne set for new king

REUTERS, MELBOURNE

Jannik Sinner has sprinted past opponents at the Australian Open in his quest for a maiden Grand Slam but could end up running a marathon in the final against Daniil Medvedev on Sunday, when Melbourne Park will crown a new king.

Sinner made sure that this becomes the first

since he began working with Darren Cahill, who believes the fourth seed has all the weapons to land one of the game's four big prizes.

"He's got the qualities I believe that a lot of the great champions in the game have, but you've got to start winning to let that come to fruition," the Australian coach said.

Belief and a rich vein of form might, however,



It will be the first Australian Open final since 2005 not to feature at least one of the three players who have dominated men's tennis for two decades - Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer, and Rafael Nadal.

Daniil Medvedev, who has now reached six Grand Slam finals, has defeated Sinner six times in nine meetings but lost their last three clashes on hardcourts in 2023.

Sinner is the first Italian player to play at the Australian Open final, and winning would mean he becomes the third from his country to win a Grand Slam.



final since 2005 sans the 'big three' of Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer or Rafa Nadal when he dismantled reigning champion Djokovic in the semifinals to end the world number one's bid for a record 25th major.

It was the Italian's third victory in four matches against Djokovic since November, confirming a red-hot run of form that, Sinner says, has primed him for his first run to the business end of a major.

Sinner's game has moved to another level

count for nothing against the incredible will power of Russian Medvedev, who has twice battled back from the brink of defeat to make his third Australian Open final.

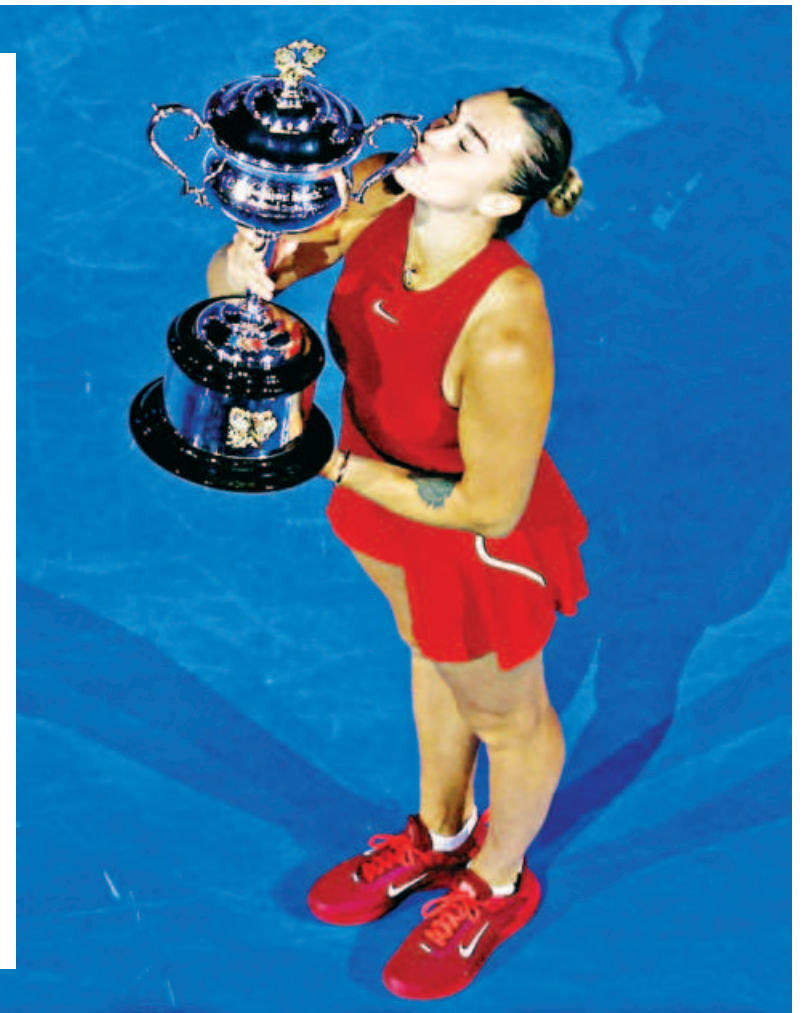
While Sinner has spent a little more than 14 hours on court, his third-seeded opponent has battled for more than 20 thanks in large part to his five-set wins over Emil Ruusuvuori in the second round and Alexander Zverev in the semifinals.

Aryna Sabalenka is the first player to win back-to-back titles in the women's singles event of the Australian Open in over a decade she powered to a 6-3 6-2 victory over Chinese 12th seed Zheng Qinwen on Saturday. The last player to achieve this feat was her compatriot Victoria Azarenka, who won the title in 2012 and 2013.

Sabalenka lost five games against Zheng Qinwen, the fewest in the Australian Open final since Azarenka defeated Maria Sharapova 6-3, 6-0 in 2012.

Sabalenka won the Australian Open without dropping a single set, a feat last achieved by Serena Williams in 2007. She also dropped just 31 games across the tournament, the lowest in this century.

This was Zheng Qinwen's first ever final in a Grand Slam event. The Chinese player, ranked 12th in the world, didn't face anyone from the top 50 on her way to the final. She is the third player in the Open era to reach a Grand Slam final without facing a seeded player.



### SHORT CORNER

#### BFF recognises 'best referee' to promote 'fair refereeing'

In a first of its kind initiative, the Bangladesh Football Federation has given recognition to Alomgir Sarker as the best referee for the month of December, and hailed the initiative as a step towards motivating referees to do a better job. Imrul Hasan, BFF's vice-president and chairman of the Professional Football League Committee, handed over a crest and a cheque of Tk 50,000 as recognition to the referee for his performance in December.

#### Smith guides Australia to healthy position

Steve Smith guided Australia to a healthy position as they reached 60-2 at stumps on the third day of the second Test against the West Indies in Brisbane on Saturday. Australia need another 156 runs for victory to take a clean sweep of the two-Test series with eight wickets in hand. At stumps, Smith was on 33 with a struggling Cameron Green alongside him on 9.

#### Xabi plays down Liverpool speculation

Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso on Friday played down speculation he could replace Jurgen Klopp at Liverpool in the summer. "I'm trying to give my best to help prepare my players to be ready. And that's my goal, what comes next, I don't know," said Alonso, a former Liverpool player whose unbeaten Leverkusen side sit four points clear of Bayern Munich at the top of the Bundesliga table.

\*Read The Daily Star website for the full stories

## 'Leg-spinners need to be encouraged more in BPL'

*Aamer Sohail has been closely following Bangladesh cricket in recent years as the former Pakistan captain is once again featuring in the commentary panel of the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL). During an exclusive interview with The Daily Star's Mazhar Uddin, the 57-year-old spoke candidly about his memories associated with Bangladesh and things that need to be done for the progress of the country's cricket alongside a few other topics. The excerpts of the interview are given below:*

The Daily Star (DS): You were here in the previous edition of the BPL as well, tell us about your BPL experience.

**Aamer Sohail (AS):** I think last year what we noticed is that the teams were not really balanced. You know some teams had all the big names while others didn't have the balance and the competition wasn't that stiff. But this time around, all the teams are well-balanced and they are well-resourced to be able to compete well. But at the same time what I have seen in the first leg is that the batters have been impetuous and they are not giving themselves enough time. They come out with the mindset to score 200 runs and that's why they are faltering. So, if the top-order batters try to be professional and spend a bit of time before they express themselves then it will be better.

**DS:** As a franchise league, what are the areas you think BPL can improve to make this tournament more productive?

**AS:** As I said earlier, this time all the teams are well-balanced so we are expecting a great tournament. The only thing I want to see in BPL is leg-spinners being encouraged more to come out and compete at this level because most international teams have leg-spinners

but Bangladesh don't.

**DS:** With the ICC T20 World Cup scheduled for later this year, what should be the focus for the Bangladesh team since they struggle in this format?

**AS:** I think Bangladesh need to know how to post a certain total on the board according to the demand of the pitch. At the same time, the batters need to know exactly what score the bowlers can defend on a certain type of surface. If the bowlers are able to defend a total of around 160-170, the batters would need to find a way to score that without taking too many chances. Similarly, the bowlers need to know what their batters are capable of without coming out of their comfort zones. That's the type of compliment I would like to see.

**DS:** Despite producing some fine cricketers, Bangladesh are yet to win a major title. What do you think about it?

**AS:** They actually came close during the Asia Cups but I think Bangladesh didn't have good fast bowlers in the past. Initially, Bangladesh were over-reliant on their spinners but there is a good crop

of fast bowlers now. Having a mixture of good fast bowlers and spinners will be the way forward and that can change things for Bangladesh.

**DS:** How do you see the dominance of the Indian Premier League and its effect on the Pakistani cricketers who don't feature in the tournament?

**AS:** I think there is no effect on the Pakistani players apart from the monetary benefits. The Pakistan Super League is a big brand and they are featuring in Big Bash, BPL and they are being sought by different leagues around the world. So, I don't think it is hurting Pakistan cricket if they are not participating in the IPL.

**DS:** How difficult it is for batters to cope with all three formats and be successful in this era? Who do you think is the best in modern-day cricket?

**AS:** I don't think it should be a problem for the batters if they have good techniques and they know how to maneuver the length. If they know how to score some runs on good deliveries, they shouldn't have problems playing in all three formats.



## What's cooking in the sports arena?

The on-and-off-field issues in BPL, India making England taste their 'Bazball' tonic, Jurgen Klopp's imminent departure from Liverpool and the Australian Open - in this episode of The Daily Star's multimedia show, 'Pitch Perfect', we try to discuss briefly the current sporting scenario.

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England batter Ollie Pope celebrates his fifth Test ton and first against India during his unbeaten 148 in Hyderabad on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP



Chattogram Challengers pacer Curtis Campher celebrates the dismissal of Mahmudullah Riyad of Fortune Barishal during their Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) match at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday. The Irish all-rounder first shone with the bat, scoring an unbeaten nine-ball 29, before returning figures of four for 20 as Chattogram won the match by 10 runs.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## Barishal locals' experience not yet breaking the chain

SPORTS REPORTER FROM SYLHET

Fortune Barishal were unable to break the chain of defeats against Chattogram Challengers, succumbing to a third successive defeat in a 10-run loss at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday.

Chattogram's Sri Lankan opener Avishka Fernando ensured that his chance that was dropped would be a costly one, setting up the victory for his side with an unbeaten 91 off 50 deliveries.

Yet in chase when Shehzad Ahmed's 17-ball 39 saw the scoring rate reaching 10 in the Powerplay, it appeared that Barishal had the upper hand. But skipper Tamim Iqbal, who started well along with Soumya Sarkar, could not capitalise against Chattogram's Bilal Khan, Shohidul Islam and Nihaduzzaman during a 29-ball 36-run stand.

Despite having so many local stars with experience, Tamim's 30 off 33, Soumya's 17 off 16 and Mushfiqur Rahim's 23 off 22 did not carry the momentum following Shehzad's initial burst. Mahmudullah Riyad, too, did not have a hay day even as he was dismissed for three.

Tamim felt the pressure first and fell to Curtis Campher before the Ireland all-rounder picked up three more wickets in quick time. It led to Mushfiqur and Mehedi Hasan Miraz having to rebuild. But once the big shots needed to come, Barishal struggled.

Barishal's local stars reminded of Bangladesh's

national team's performances over the years in T20 format - failure to target bowlers being one of the major reasons. Despite having better scoring rate than Chattogram's, Barishal eventually fell apart despite Miraz's 16-ball 35 reducing the margin.

Miraz, in the post-match press conference, was asked whether the Soumya-Tamim partnership at the top was up to the mark during a big chase.

"In T20s, if you want to get more runs, you need to maintain the run-rate. We came to chase down 194, needed nine and a half runs per over. Here you can't relax in certain overs. The way we played the Powerplay is how you need to play the 20 overs. If you don't play that way, the run-rate will climb," Miraz said.

"They [Chattogram] bowled two good overs in the middle and we lost three wickets there. The wickets fell and the required rate climbed too and at one point we needed 14 per over. If we had gotten 10 to 11 per over, maybe things would have been easier," Miraz added.

Barishal had created a stir for at least a day, when they had cried foul regarding the departure of Shoab Malik. The owner then tried to drive away the controversy by retracting from his earlier statements regarding Malik. Yet, for all the attention they got off the field, the spark needed from the locals have not been there. Miraz just reminded at the end that locals have more responsibility and Barishal would need theirs' to fire the team.