

# Arrives the changing of guard, at last

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"One will always corrupt, two will always divide, but with three, there is balance." These words, adapted from J.R.R. Tolkien's epic 'The Lord of the Rings', resonate far beyond the realm of the fictional Middle-earth.

Balance. It's what makes any narrative compelling, any rivalry legendary. In politics, sports, or even blockbuster movies, the dynamics of three forces often creates drama and longevity; the lack of it leads to ominous stagnation.

Tennis, too, has shown this to be true. For over two decades, the "Big Three" of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, and Novak Djokovic dominated the sport, pushing each other to unimaginable heights. Now, a new story begins.

Year 2024 finally marked the passing of the torch. Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner claimed four Grand Slam titles between them. Their meteoric rise coincided with the twilight of Djokovic, who, despite winning Olympic gold in Paris -- where he beat Alcaraz in straight sets in a fascinating encounter -- failed to claim a major title for the first time since 2017.

Adding to the seismic shift, Rafael Nadal's retirement brought an emotional close to an era -- one also shaped by prominent supporting casts like Andy Murray and Marat Safin, who laid their trusted rackets to rest as well.

To understand the significance of this transition, one must revisit the golden age of Federer, Nadal, and Djokovic. They didn't just play tennis; they redefined it. From 2003 to the end of 2023, the Big Three captured 65 of the 80 Grand Slam tournaments, while becoming second-best on eight occasions in the period.

Their rivalry wasn't just about trophies -- it was about contrast,

style, and evolution. While Federer embodied grace -- his fluid one-handed backhand and effortless footwork mesmerising fans -- Nadal was the embodiment of grit; his ferocious topspin and unrelenting spirit redefining what it meant to leave it all on the battlefield.

And last but not the least, Djokovic, the youngest, emerged as the ultimate competitor. His elastic movement, adaptability, and mental fortitude often made him untouchable. Together, they created an era that will forever be remembered as tennis' zenith.

#### All good things must end

Time, however, spares no one. Federer retired in 2022, unable to overcome chronic injuries. Nadal, plagued by physical setbacks, made the decision to step away this year. Djokovic, on the other hand, chasing his 25th Grand Slam title, came close but fell short in crucial moments. His Olympic gold in Paris, however, completed his career resume, affirming his stature among the all-time greats.

At 37, Djokovic still remains a force to be reckoned with, but his dominance is waning as the next generation steps forward with all guns blazing.

#### Ambassadors of a new era

Alcaraz and Sinner are not mere successors -- they are disruptors. Alcaraz, just 21, blends power and finesse like none before him. The Spaniard's relentless energy on court and ability to adapt to any surface make him a complete package. From clay to grass, winning Roland Garros and Wimbledon this year demonstrated his versatility and an insatiable appetite for success.

On the other hand, Sinner, at 23, is a methodical

genius. With laser sharp groundstrokes and ice-cold composure, he's been a consistent threat. His victories at the Australian Open, the US Open, and the ATP Finals showcased the Italian's consistency across hard court surfaces. Moreover, apart from helping his country to consecutive Davis Cup crown, Sinner is all set to end the year as the No.1-ranked player, joining Murray and Alcaraz to become only the third one outside the Big Three to do so since 2003.

Earlier in the year, Alcaraz's French Open win over Sinner in an electrifying five set semifinal battle hinted at what lies ahead.

#### The need for three

Even as tennis transitions, a question thus lingers: who will complete the triad to form a musical chord, setting the harmonic foundation of the new era? Whoever it may be, the emergence of a third rival will define whether this new era matches the greatness of its predecessor.

Holger Rune, the Danish prodigy, has shown flashes of brilliance. American Taylor Fritz, with athleticism and charisma, could also rise to the occasion, while the likes of the experienced German Alexander Zverev could recalibrate to challenge the status quo. Even Jack Draper -- the 22-year-old British, who recently expressed his belief in defeating both Alcaraz and Sinner in 2025, following his accelerating rise to the top 15 from outside the top 60 rankings -- could step into the void as well.

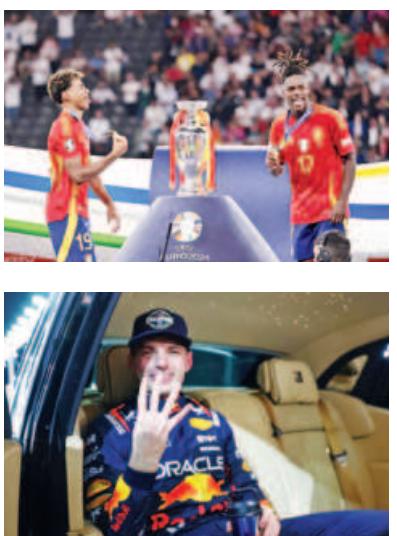
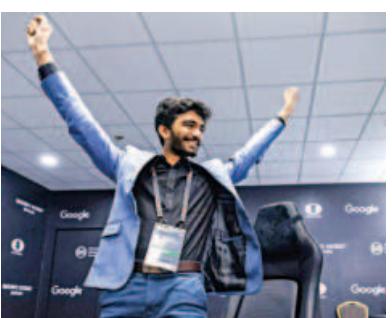
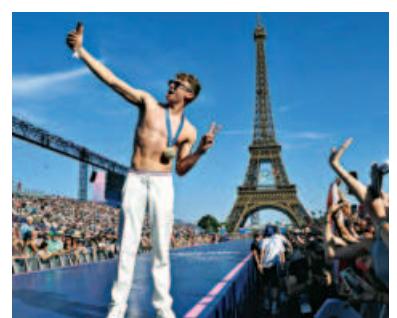
For now, though, the stage is set. Alcaraz brings fire; Sinner, ice. Records will fall, new legends will rise, and tennis will evolve; as it always does.



## MOMENTS that made 2024



There have been many iconic moments and momentous achievements in the sporting world in 2024, which was dominated by the Paris Olympics. Young French swimmer Leon Marchand emerged as the biggest star of the pool with four individual gold medals while American gymnast Simone Biles cemented her place as one of the greatest with three gold and a silver medal. Pakistani javelin thrower Arshad Nadeem created history, becoming the first individual gold-medallist from his nation. Away from the Olympics, Dutchman Max Verstappen extended his Formula 1 dominance with a fourth consecutive world title while Spain returned to the top of European football with a mesmerising display in Germany and Argentina won consecutive Copa America titles. Meanwhile, India's 11-year-wait for a global cricketing title ended with the T20 World Cup in USA and the West Indies while New Zealand upset the world order to take the women's title. Last but not the least, Gukesh Dommaraju of India, aged only 18, beat reigning champion Ding Liren of China to claim chess's world title, and becoming the youngest to do so.



## Gone but not forgotten

