

Blockbuster 'Sincaraz' rivalry ready to light up US Open

AGENCIES

World number one Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz will renew their blockbuster rivalry when the US Open begins on Sunday, as the Italian also races against time to be fully fit for the defense of his crown.

The 23-year-old Sinner, who retired ill during the Cincinnati Open final against Alcaraz earlier this week, admitted Friday that he is "not 100% yet" but expects to be ready when he opens against Czech qualifier Vit Kopřiva on Monday.

"It was a virus, also some other players had," Sinner said at Flushing Meadows. "Just sleeping and recovering. Nothing crazy. I feel good, mostly recovered. We are aiming to be there in a couple of days."

Despite concerns, the motivation could not be higher. Sinner is looking to become the first man to repeat as US Open champion since Roger Federer won five in a row from 2004-2008. "It's the last Grand Slam of the season, so motivations are very high," he said.

Sinner's rivalry with Alcaraz, dubbed "Sincaraz", has become the defining duel of the post-Big Three era following the retirements of Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal and the declining Novak Djokovic.

Their battles have already reached iconic status, from Alcaraz's epic five-set



win over Sinner in the 2022 quarterfinals at Flushing Meadows to this year's Grand Slam finals, where Alcaraz triumphed at Roland Garros before Sinner answered at Wimbledon.

"Every time we play, our level is really high," Alcaraz said. "I don't see any players reaching that level when they face each other."

Australian legend Rod Laver praised their budding rivalry, calling it "a gift to our sport".

Beyond bragging rights, the world number one ranking is also at stake.

Alcaraz closed to within 2,000 points of Sinner after Cincinnati, meaning the Spaniard can reclaim the top spot if he advances one round further than the Italian in New York.

For Sinner, the road has not been without turbulence. His breakthrough title here last year came amid a doping controversy, when an accidental exposure saw him test positive for clostebol. After serving a three-month suspension following his Australian Open win in January, Sinner has rebuilt his team, reuniting with fitness coach Umberto Ferrara.

"I feel like it's over. We are focusing on hard work again and trying to get better as an athlete," Sinner said.

Meanwhile, Alcaraz opens against big-serving American Reilly Opelka, with a possible showdown against 38-year-old Novak Djokovic looming later in the draw. Djokovic, still chasing a record 25th Grand Slam, insists he remains a threat. "Those are the tournaments I care about the most," the Serb said.

As the new generation takes center stage, the US Open promises another thrilling chapter in tennis's shifting era.

Clearing hurdles, on and off the track

SPORTS REPORTER

Hurdles don't just exist on the track. For some athletes, the barriers begin long before the starting gun is fired.

On the second day of the 17th National Summer Athletics Championships on Saturday, Roksana Begum sprinted through the finish line in the women's 100m hurdles with a time of 15 seconds -- a performance that crowned her champion yet again. It's the second time this year she has taken the national title in this event, having won earlier in February. But the track is only a small part of Roksana's story.

She grew up in Sonapur, a quiet corner of Noakhali, where dreams don't often stretch as far as national stadiums. Her father drove a microbus, and with three brothers and a sister depending on her, Roksana became the family's main source of income. Since 2020, she has served in the Bangladesh Army -- a job that not only allows her to support her loved ones but also keeps her athletic ambitions alive.

"My salary from the army helps me take care of my family," she said after winning her race at the National Stadium's athletics track.

Her journey into sports began with long jump, guided by coach Rafiqullah Milon. He later encouraged her to take up hurdles -- a suggestion that would shape her career. But getting to this point wasn't just about athletic training. She had to overcome the questions thrown at her in her village. "People didn't understand. They questioned what I was doing, where I was going," Roksana recalled. "They didn't know I was training."



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Across the men's field, Tanvir Faisal, also representing the Bangladesh Army, claimed his third straight title in the men's 110m hurdles. It's a feat few can match, yet Tanvir knows his discipline doesn't always get the recognition it deserves. "We're athletes too, just like the 100m sprinters. But the spotlight rarely falls on us," he exclaimed.

For Tanvir, hurdles are more than an event. "Athletics is about struggle. You can see that just by looking at me," he joked. "But I love it. Hurdles are where I belong."

His latest win added another gold to his name, but it's the first title that still lights up his memory. "Nothing beats the first time. That joy -- you don't forget it."

As the championships come to a conclusion on Sunday, names will fade from the headlines. But for Roksana and Tanvir, the real stories aren't written on leaderboards. They're found in early-morning training runs, in overcoming doubts, in chasing a future that once seemed out of reach.

Realistic Lipu plays it safe for Asia Cup squad

SPORTS REPORTER

On Friday, chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu achieved what many of his predecessors couldn't do -- announce a Bangladesh squad for a tournament without much uproar.

The Bangladesh team selection committee named a 16-member squad for the upcoming Asia Cup, scheduled to be staged at the UAE from September 9. The same squad will also compete in the three-match T20I series against Netherlands at home, starting on August 30.

"There is always a chance to qualify for the final as we have played in the Asia Cup final thrice. But I think we need to think step by step."

Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu
Bangladesh chief selector

2-1 at home last month -- wicketkeeper-batter Nurul Hasan Sohan and batter Saif Hassan came in at the expense of all-rounder Mehidy Hasan Miraz and opener Mohammad Naim.

The omissions of Miraz and Naim wasn't a surprise as both players failed to cement their places despite getting several opportunities in recent months.

Miraz, who had opted out of the Netherlands series due to family reasons, had featured in five of Bangladesh's last nine T20Is, making mere 64 runs and taking only four wickets.



A key reason behind this mellow response was perhaps that the selectors didn't deviate much from the squads that won them bilateral T20 series over Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Only two changes were made from the Bangladesh squad which beat Pakistan

Meanwhile, Naim, who returned to the side in the Sri Lanka series in July after three years, could not replicate his domestic dominance, making only 45 runs in three matches.

Their poor performances prompted the selectors to bring in Sohan and Saif after

a long hiatus even though both of them have not been consistent in this format in recent times.

When asked to explain their inclusions, the chief selector said, "We had extensive discussions about Sohan during the Sri Lanka tour. At that time, we thought and realised that given our team's formation, his chances of making the playing XI were very slim."

"What we felt then was that if he played in the Global Super League as preparation -- since we knew he would also be playing for the 'A' team in Darwin -- it would serve as additional preparation... Facing such big challenges before joining the Asia Cup squad was important."

"In Saif's case, if there's a gap in the top or middle-order -- let's say if Tawhid Hridoy gets injured -- we believe he can cover both positions," he added.

When it came to talking about the Tigers' chances of winning the upcoming show-piece event, Lipu gave a realist answer.

"Emotionally, I'm also hopeful that the team will go there with the target of becoming champions. But when you think analytically and logically, you have to consider where you actually stand and what kind of challenges lie ahead."

"There is always a chance to qualify for the final as we have played in the Asia Cup final thrice. But I think we need to think step by step."

Uncapped Jhelik in Tigresses' World Cup squad

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) yesterday named uncapped wicketkeeper-batter Rubya Haider Jhelik in their 15-member squad for the upcoming ICC Women's World Cup, to be held in India and Sri Lanka from September 30 to November 2.

The selectors also named off-spinner Nishita Akter and top-order batter Sumaiya Akter, while excluding Dilara Akter, Jannatul Ferdous Sumona, and Ishma Tanjim, who were part of the squad in the qualifiers in Pakistan in April.

"Rubya has earned a place through sheer hard work. We see her as a valuable option both as a reserve keeper and a backup opener," Sazzad

SQUAD

Nigar Sultana Joty (captain), Nahida Akter (vice-captain), Farzana Haque, Rubya Haider Jhelik, Sharmin Supta, Sobhana Mostary, Ritu Moni, Shorna Akter, Fahima Khatun, Rabeya Khan, Marufa Akter, Fariha Islam, Shanjida Akther, Nishita Akter, Sumaiya Akter

Ahmed Shipon, BCB women's wing chief selector, was quoted in a press release.

"Nishita is consistent, calm under pressure, and her ability to contain left-handers gave her an edge.

"Sumaiya brings the ability to occupy the crease and accelerate when needed. With her skill set and fielding standards, she gives us an all-round option," he added.

The team, which is currently taking part in the Challenge Cup -- scheduled until August 28 -- at the BKSP, will move to Sylhet for a preparation camp earlier next month. They are expected to leave for Colombo on September 23, where they will play two official warm-up matches against Sri Lanka 'A' and Sri Lanka on September 25 and 27 ahead of the showpiece event.

The Tigresses will begin their World Cup campaign against Pakistan in Colombo on October 2.

The team will then travel to Guwahati for their next two games against England and New Zealand on October 7 and 10, before moving to Visakhapatnam to face South Africa and Australia on October 13 and 16.

Bangladesh's last two league games will be held in Navi Mumbai against Sri Lanka and India on October 20 and 26.

This will only be Tigresses' second appearance in the 50-over World Cup, having qualified for the first time in the 2022 edition, in which they finished seventh among eight teams with just a solitary win.



SPURS STUN CITY AT ETIHAD

Tottenham forward Brennan Johnson celebrates after netting the opener in their 2-0 Premier League win over hosts Manchester City, whose troubles from last season were exposed once more on Saturday, raising questions over their quest to regain the Premier League title. Goals from Johnson and Joao Palhinha, who capitalised on a blunder by City goalkeeper James Trafford, saw the Europa League go 2-0 up in the first half as Spurs went top of the table, making it a perfect start for Thomas Frank after two league games in charge. In the last 13 Premier League meetings between the sides, City have won just four despite several changes of management at Spurs in that time.

PHOTO: AFP

'Bangladeshis have six-hitting power'

SPORTS REPORTER

Power hitting coach Julian Wood dismissed the wide-spread belief that Bangladeshi cricketers don't have the power to clear the ropes and said that he is trying to improve the ball-striking consistency of the power-hitters in his brief stint with the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB).

Wood, who has previously worked for different Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) franchises, arrived in the country earlier this month.

The English coach first worked with the national women's team for five days at the BKSP and then began working with the Tigers in their preparation camp in Dhaka ahead of the upcoming three-match T20I series against Netherlands and Asia Cup.

The preparation camp has now shifted to Sylhet and the 56-year-old coach is accompanying the side in there as well.

On Saturday, Wood spoke with the media about his methods and divulged his observations on the players based on the last two weeks.

"I was aware of the myth that Bangladeshis don't have power. West Indians are big. They are big and they are built differently. English are Australians

are strong. These guys [from Bangladesh] are slightly smaller but they have power," Wood told reporters in Sylhet.

"They have to know how to use and access the power. Developing the power through their body and out through their hands. They rely heavily on rhythm and timing of the movements. If those are right, and the sequencing is right, then exit velocity will go up."

"My job is to give them the tools and mindset to make them think that they can. Having the belief and mindset is a massive part," he added.

According to Wood, there are a few natural big-hitters in the mix but most of the players depend on timing.

"We have two or three power players, which is great. I am trying to ensure more consistency in their ball striking."

"For guys who are timers [of the ball], it is about moving their body to a slightly better position with better sequencing... It is basically movement over techniques and mechanics," Wood said.

Out of all the players he has worked with in the camp, wicketkeeper-batter Jaker Ali has impressed him the most.

"If I have to pick one then it is Jaker. Jaker is dangerous. The ice man."

