

Sports

Djokovic passes Tiafoe test, Serena sublime at Australian Open

Wawrinka, Venus out, Osaka charges through

MELBOURNE: Eight-time champion Novak Djokovic was made to sweat at the Australian Open yesterday as Serena Williams made serene progress in her bid for a record-equaling 24th Grand Slam title. Women's favorite Naomi Osaka also charged through but fellow major-winners Stan Wawrinka, Bianca Andreescu and Petra Kvitova were all second-round casualties. Djokovic was given a stern examination by America's Frances Tiafoe and dropped his first set of the tournament before recovering to win 6-3, 6-7 (3/7), 7-6 (7/2), 6-3. "I was fortunate to get through the third set today, it was anybody's game," said the defending champion, after his win in hot conditions on Rod Laver Arena.

The top seed looked in control after taking the first set, but lightning-quick Tiafoe, who reached the quarter-finals two years ago, refused to go quietly. The American bounced back to take a close second set but imploded as tensions rose in the fourth, receiving a code violation for an audible obscenity as Djokovic took charge. "I thought we both played on a pretty high level. I mean, he pushed me to the very limit," said Djokovic.

The Serb is targeting a record-extending ninth title and his 18th Grand Slam trophy overall as he snaps at the heels of Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer, who top the all-time list with 20 each. He avoided the fate of 2014 winner Wawrinka, who blew three match points in the fifth-set tiebreaker in his four-hour epic with Marton Fucsovics, who won 7-5, 6-1, 4-6, 2-6, 7-6 (11/9). "I had some chance to finish the match, I didn't finish," said the 35-year-old Swiss, a three-time Grand Slam winner. "I hesitated a little bit when I had the match point and I lost it."

'Here to have fun'

Osaka, whose three Grand Slam titles include the

2019 Australian crown, had no such trouble in her evening match against France's Caroline Garcia, winning 6-2, 6-3 in 61 minutes. Earlier Williams, 39, continued her quest to equal Margaret Court's all-time mark of 24 Grand Slams with a 6-3, 6-0 romp past 99th-ranked Serbian Nina Stojanovic. Williams hit 27 winners in her 101st Australian Open match while again sporting her unique, one-legged catsuit inspired by track legend 'Flo-Jo'.

"I'm here to have fun and it's great to be playing in front of a crowd," said the American great. With Australia virtually virus-free, the tournament is welcoming the biggest Grand Slam crowds since the pandemic, although attendances are well down on previous years.

Williams' elder sister Venus, 40, was a major casualty on day three when she painfully rolled her ankle in the first set against Sara Errani before hobbling through a 6-1, 6-0 defeat. And Andreescu, the 2019 US Open champion who missed the entire 2020 season with a knee injury, saw her comeback come to an abrupt end 6-3, 6-2 against Taiwan's Hsieh Su-wei. "You need to find a way to get through and the crowd helped me fight," said Hsieh after beating the Canadian, who was coming off a draining three-setter against Mihaela Buzarnescu.

Elsewhere Kvitova, the former Wimbledon champion and Melbourne runner-up in 2019, committed 44 unforced errors in her 6-4, 1-6, 6-1 defeat to Romania's Sorana Cirstea as the big names tumbled on day three. However, reigning US Open champion Dominic Thiem, runner-up to Djokovic last year, was all smiles as he beat Germany's Dominik Koepfer 6-4, 6-0, 6-2. "It was great, to be honest," Thiem said of his performance on Margaret Court Arena. Eighth seed Diego Schwartzmann of Argentina also hurried into the last 32, brushing



MELBOURNE: Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return against Frances Tiafoe of the US during their men's singles match on day three of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

aside Frenchman Alexandre Muller 6-2, 6-0, 6-3 in an hour and 32 minutes on 1573 Arena.

Later yesterday, volatile Australian Nick Kyrgios smashed a racquet, delivered underarm serves, ranted at the umpire and saved two match points Wednesday on his way into the Australian Open third round. The 25-year-old drew a raucous,

socially distanced crowd to his favored John Cain Arena and kept them highly entertained, with the atmosphere electric in a gripping clash with Frenchman Ugo Humbert. He eventually came through 5-7, 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4 after 3hrs 25mins against the 29th seed to set up a blockbuster clash with third seed Thiem. —AFP

Australian Open makes best of tough times

MELBOURNE: The usual Australian Open experience, with tens of thousands of excited fans streaming into Melbourne Park, is just a memory this year as the coronavirus puts a dampener on the tennis season's opening Grand Slam. Normally the complex on the banks of the Yarra River is abuzz for the 'Happy Slam', which is known for its relaxed atmosphere, perfect weather and ever-growing numbers of spectators.

But after months of effort and negotiations to get the Australian Open up and running in Melbourne, which is fiercely protective of its virtually virus-free status, the atmosphere so far has been low-key. While 64,387 fans crammed into the grounds on day one last year, only 17,922 turned up this time despite major drawcards such as Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic.

Some blamed the lacklustre turnout, which was well below the 30,000 maximum allowed under COVID restrictions, to unusually cool and cloudy weather. But even when the sun came out on day two, the numbers were much the same — although still considerably more than at any other Grand Slam since the pandemic took hold.

Last year, Wimbledon was cancelled for the first time since World War II, the US Open was held behind closed doors and only tiny numbers of fans were allowed at the delayed French Open. "I'm just glad it's on," said Jane Alexander, who was enjoying the tennis but disappointed at the atmosphere, with throngs of empty blue seats on the outside courts. "I just wish there were more people here."

Masks and sanitizer

Even diminished crowds are an accomplishment. Helped by aggressive travel restrictions and lockdowns, Australia has virtually eradicated the virus, making it one of the few countries where spectators can attend live sport. But the travel rules have also kept international fans away, and after the tournament was pushed back three weeks to allow for quarantine, it no longer falls in school holidays.

Fans who make the effort are faced with a precinct divided into three separate zones around



MELBOURNE: Fans of Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov cheer him on against Australia's Alex Bolt during their men's singles match on day three of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

Rod Laver, Margaret Court and John Cain arenas, curbing the usual free flow of spectators around the precinct. Social distancing measures are in place and sanitizing stations dotted around Melbourne Park. While patrons can go mask-free in the major stadiums if the roof is open, face-coverings must be worn if it is closed.

Garden Square, which has a giant screen and food outlets, is normally teeming with fans, but only a smattering were on-site yesterday, although those there were grateful the event was on at all. "Yeah it's exciting to be at the Australian Open. We've (Melbourne) worked really hard to keep (coronavirus) case numbers down. So it feels like a good reward," said Melbourne resident Elizabeth Little.

Kristen O'Brien said the tough measures were necessary to keep people safe in a city that only emerged from a four-month lockdown in October. "We don't want to go back into lockdown so it's worked out okay," she said. "We don't want to lose major events and we need tourism," she added, of the balancing act faced by organizers and the Victoria state government to ensure the event takes place.

Liverpool striker Salah. In a video call organized by their shared sponsor, he imparts wisdom on dealing with the pressures of high-level sport. "I can tell you that when I started working on my mental strength more, I saw huge improvements in my play," Salah told her in a post shared last week.

Guided by Spanish coach Justo Gonzalez, Sherif went on a 26-match win streak and cracked the top 200 in women's rankings just months into her budding career last year. In Egypt, where football is normally the dominant sport, her gritty demeanor and determination to excel have scored her much-needed sponsorship. One of Africa's richest tycoons, Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris, has lent his financial support to Sherif through his property firm Zed. She hopes to continue her stellar run and represent Egypt in the delayed Tokyo Olympics this year — another first for the country.

For now she is savoring the historic win and setting her sights on the next round in Melbourne. "It means a lot to me. This was a mental barrier I had to pass... it was very, very tough to adapt my game to it. Courts are faster and the heat... but (I am) very, very happy with my accomplishment," said Sherif. "And I'm going for more," she added. —AFP

Sherif becomes first Egyptian woman to advance in Grand Slam

CAIRO: Mayar Sherif became the first Egyptian woman Tuesday to advance past the first round of a Grand Slam tennis tournament on Tuesday, with a little help from superstar footballing compatriot Mohamed Salah. The Cairo-born, California-educated Sherif, 24, beat French player Chloe Paquet 7-5, 7-5 in what Australian Open organizers called a "slice of history".

The win guarantees Sherif will continue her meteoric rise in the world rankings (she is currently at 131) and comes only a few months after she secured a berth at Roland Garros last year — also a historic first at the time. She will face Kaja Juvan in the next round, after the Slovenian's British opponent Johanna Konta was forced to abandon her match due to injury.

The successive achievements of the young Egyptian tennis player since 2019, when she turned professional, have caught the eye of



MELBOURNE: Egypt's Mayar Sherif celebrates beating France's Chloe Paquet in their women's singles match on day two of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne on Tuesday. —AFP

News in brief

Mavs stop national anthem

LOS ANGELES: The Dallas Mavericks have opted to stop playing the US national anthem before games this season, reports said Tuesday, breaking with a pre-game ritual that is widespread in American sport. The Athletic website said the Mavericks' policy against playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" before home games at the American Airlines Center was confirmed by owner Mark Cuban. Cuban did not comment further. NBA rules require players to stand for the anthem, but commissioner Adam Silver has relaxed that rule following the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests which erupted after the death of George Floyd last year. —AFP

MLB confirms April 1 start

LOS ANGELES: Major League Baseball and the league's players union have agreed health and safety protocols for the 2021 season, retaining two innovations introduced during last year's pandemic-shortened campaign, the league said Tuesday. A statement from MLB said the new 162-game season, which is due to start on April 1, would continue to use seven-inning doubleheader games to ease fixture congestion and use automatic base runners in extra innings. But the league has dispensed with the universal designated hitter rule used in both the American League and National League during last year's 60-game season. —AFP

Super Bowl viewership low

NEW YORK: The 2021 Super Bowl was watched by 96.4 million people across all platforms, the host broadcaster said Tuesday, the lowest viewership since 2007 — despite record-smashing streaming audiences. The NFL championship match is the most-watched TV event of the year in the United States. Some 102.3 million people tuned in for last year's Super Bowl. By comparison, the second-most watched event was another American football game which recorded 43 million views. The 55th Super Bowl was nonetheless a streaming success, becoming the most live-streamed NFL game ever, CBS said in a statement. —AFP

Mitchell masterclass as Jazz march on

LOS ANGELES: Donovan Mitchell poured in 36 points as the Utah Jazz extended their Western Conference lead on Tuesday with a 122-108 defeat of the Boston Celtics. Mitchell delivered another virtuoso performance which included six three-pointers and nine assists as the Jazz rolled to a win that equaled their best ever start to a season. Joe Ingles added 24 points while French international Rudy Gobert muscled his way to 18 points in Salt Lake City. The Jazz now lead the West with a 20-5 record, one game clear of the Los Angeles Lakers, having won 16 of their last 17 games.

"I think the biggest thing is our competitiveness, continuing the fight," said Mitchell, revealing that Utah were determined to atone for their disappointing first-round loss to Denver in last season's playoffs. "That was a tough loss for us, but this is how you're supposed to respond if you want to be the team we want to be," Mitchell said. —AFP