

'SIR ANDY' SEEKS END TO AUST OPEN AGONY

MELBOURNE: Having snatched Novak Djokovic's world number one ranking in a thrilling late-season raid, Andy Murray will bid to storm the Serb's Melbourne Park fortress and capture an elusive Australian Open title after five agonizing near misses. Murray enters the year's first grand slam in unknown territory, rated as top seed for the first time in his 12th campaign and with a 'Sir' in front of his name as the recipient of a knighthood from Britain's New Year's honors list.

The Scot also brings the knowledge that 10 years of hard graft to reach the summit of the men's game could end in a heartbeat if defending champion Djokovic has his way. "I'd say Novak Djokovic is still the biggest threat to the number one ranking," Murray said in Doha where he kicked off his season. "His record in Australia is incredible. He has won it six times and won a number of finals against me too so I'm

expecting him to play very well there."

Few players know how heavy lies the crown as fellow 29-year-old Djokovic, who spoke of hungrier wolves snapping at his heels after his defeat over Murray last year, his fourth in a Melbourne Park final between the pair. Long the alpha male of the pack, Djokovic completed his sweep of grand slam titles at last year's French Open then fell away dramatically in the second half of the season.

Only last week, however, the Serb fired an ominous warning to Murray by snapping his 28-match winning streak in a fiery three-set decider to defend his Qatar Open title. Djokovic joined Roy Emerson as the most successful men's champion at the Australian Open last year and can take sole possession of the record with a seventh crown, having won in 2008, 2011-13 and 2015-16. Murray is saddled with a less enviable record, having become only the second man in the profes-

sional era to lose five finals at a single grand slam when defeated last year.

Bookmakers see little chance of the title going to anyone other from Djokovic and Murray but US Open champion Stan Wawrinka is the most fancied of the rest. Beating Djokovic on the blue courts of Melbourne Park invariably means winning the title and Wawrinka managed it a blockbuster quarter-final in 2014 on the way to claiming the trophy. Crowds will clamor for four-times champion Roger Federer to go deep in the tournament as he returns to grand slam action after a long layoff from a knee injury. But seeded 17th, Federer faces a treacherous first week, with fifth seed Kei Nishikori a likely third round opponent before a possible quarter-final against Murray. Ninth-seeded Spaniard Nadal, the 2009 champion, can also expect raucous support as he bids to shrug off two barren years at the grand slams. — Reuters



RIO DE JANEIRO: In this Sunday, Aug 7, 2016 file photo, Serena Williams, of the United States, reaches for a return against Daria Gavrilova, of Australia, at the 2016 Summer Olympics. — AP

IT'S ALL ABOUT SERENA AT MELBOURNE PARK

SYDNEY: For the last few years the main question regarding the women's draw at the Australian Open has been who or what can prevent Serena Williams from adding to her impressive collection of Melbourne Park titles. The answer for most of that time has been injury and, until proved otherwise, most deem it wise to continue working on the assumption that, even if not fully fit, Williams remains more than a match for any player on the women's circuit.

So, although the 35-year-old is seeded second, has played two matches in the last four months—losing one—and has drawn a tricky assignment in Belinda Bencic in round one, she is still favourite to secure her seventh Australian Open crown. Success would mean a 23rd grand slam singles title for the American, allowing Williams to pull clear of German Steffi Graf as the most decorated women's singles player in the professional era. Williams lost the number one ranking when she was beaten by Karolina Pliskova in the US Open semi-finals last September and, wrestling with a shoulder problem, did not

play again until last week's Auckland Classic. The rankings beneficiary was German Angelique Kerber, who also took away her Australian Open crown with a brilliant performance in last year's final.

In the absence of 2008 champion Maria Sharapova, who is serving out the remainder of a doping ban, and twice winner Victoria Azarenka, who has just had a baby, top seed Kerber again looks like being the most likely to threaten Williams's dominance. The 28-year-old reached the final of three of the four grand slams last year, adding a second grand slam title when she beat Pliskova to win the US Open, and a second Melbourne crown would move her further away from the pack.

Unimpressive warm-up

While her warm-up performances have been unimpressive, Kerber could have a reasonably easy ride in the opening round against 61st-ranked Ukrainian Lesia Tsurenko, who withdrew from the Hobart International with a viral illness yesterday. Third seed Agnieszka Radwanska has little

grand slam pedigree beyond a single appearance in the Wimbledon final and will have to pick herself up after a humbling experience in yesterday's Sydney International final.

The 27-year-old Pole was quite simply blown off the court by Britain's world number 10 Johanna Konta, who went on a fairytale run to the Melbourne semi-finals last year and looks a reasonable bet to go deep into the tournament this year. Spain's seventh seed Garbine Muguruza, who also owns a grand slam crown after her French Open triumph last year, will open her account against 109th-ranked New Zealander Marina Erakovic.

Even if she has never been past the fourth round in Melbourne, the 23-year-old Muguruza feels the year's first grand slam is a little more open this year. "It is a little bit more equal than last year," she told reporters in Melbourne on Thursday. "There are a lot of girls that can hold the trophy (so) it is going to be a big battle to see who is the best in these two weeks." — Reuters

PAKISTAN, W INDIES IN WORLD CUP SCRAMBLE

NEW DELHI: Pakistan ramp up their bid to ensure a spot at the 2019 World Cup and avoid the humiliation of playing minnows to make it to the 50-over showpiece event. In the week that football's world governing body FIFA announced an expanded 48-team World Cup in 2026, the battle to be one of only 10 countries at cricket's showpiece in two years' time has been brought sharply into focus.

There now follows a nerve-racking race against time with September 30 the cut-off point to ensure a guaranteed finals place as one of the top eight teams and avoid the minefield of qualification. The International Cricket Council (ICC) has long declared that the 2019 event in England and Wales would be controversially pruned down from a 14-team event which took place in Australia and New Zealand in 2015.

While eight of the top-ranked sides will get direct qualification, the four bottom-placed nations will lock horns with associate countries in a qualifier to book the final two spots. Pakistan—the 1992 champions—are precariously placed at eighth spot on 89 points—two behind Bangladesh, who will host the qualifiers in 2018, and two ahead of the West Indies.

The Azhar Ali-led side will need to win their five-match ODI series against table-toppers and current world champions Australia starting Friday to enhance their chances of qualifying directly for the event. Third-ranked India will also take on England in three one-day internationals starting on Sunday 15 as the clock ticks for the final placings to settle down. Two-time World Cup champions West Indies, currently ranked ninth in the 12-team table, are another big nation that might have to battle it out in the qualifiers.

The reigning World Twenty20 champions have been far from convincing in the 50-over format, but they are scheduled to play 12 ODI games before the September deadline. The Jason Holder-led side are scheduled to host England and then Pakistan between February and May before they tour the United Kingdom for six ODIs in August-September. The bite-sized new World Cup leaves little room for the six associate members to make an entry as Pakistan, West Indies or Bangladesh will stay firm favourites to book the last two spots should they slip into the qualifying stage.

Rising nations like Ireland, Scotland and Afghanistan—they played the 2015 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand—may be the worst affected by the trimming down. ICC chief president Dave Richardson had talked about "commercial implications" behind the move of sizing down the event, leaving many of the associate nations furious. Ireland captain William Porterfield termed the move as an "absolute joke" which will spell the "death of cricket" as the minnows made their presence felt in the last edition after beating West Indies in a league match. — AFP