

Sports

Djokovic vows to win fans' love with Federer's record in sight

First man in 71 years to win the title from match points down

LONDON: Novak Djokovic has vowed to convince fans that he is not public enemy number one even if he surpasses people's champion Roger Federer as the greatest Grand Slam title winner of all time. The world number one saved two match points to clinch a fifth Wimbledon title and 16th major on Sunday, shattering Federer's bid to become the oldest Grand Slam champion in the longest final ever contested at the tournament.

Despite being outplayed by the 37-year-old Swiss for large parts of the knife-edge encounter, the top seed emerged victorious 7-6 (7/5), 1-6, 7-6 (7/4), 4-6, 13-12 (7/3). At four hours and 57 minutes, it was the longest Wimbledon final and the first to be settled by a final set tiebreak. Djokovic is the first man in 71 years to win the title from match points down, saving two in the 16th game of the deciding set.

His major title tally is now just two behind Rafael Nadal and four off the all-time men's Grand Slam record of 20 held by Federer. He has time on his side, being a year younger than Nadal and more than five years younger than the legendary Swiss. After Sunday's epic triumph, Djokovic revealed he was able to turn the overwhelmingly pro-Federer, 14,000-strong Centre Court crowd in his favour by training his mind.

'They chant Roger, I hear Novak'

"I like to transmute it in a way: When the crowd is chanting 'Roger' I hear 'Novak,'" said the 32-year-old Djokovic. "It sounds silly, but it is like that." Djokovic has spent the best part of his career in pursuit of Nadal and Federer and attempting to seduce fans skeptical of his character. For many he is viewed as too intense, too insincere, too calculating and prone to fads.

Federer and Nadal, in comparison, are treated almost reverentially. "It's hard to not be aware of the

crowd. You have that kind of electric atmosphere, that kind of noise," said Djokovic. "Of course, if you have the majority of the crowd on your side, it helps. When you don't, then you have to find it within, I guess." Djokovic insists he won't get distracted by the pursuit of Federer's record haul. "Whether I'm going to be able to do it or not, I don't know. "I'm not really looking at age as a restriction of any kind for me at least. What I said on the court, I really meant it: Roger really inspires me with his effort at his age. "It just depends how long I'm going to play, whether I'm going to have a chance to make historic No. 1 or Slams."

When asked if he sees himself still playing at 37, Djokovic said the motivation to be treated with the same respect is strong. Eventually, hearing screams of "Let's go, Novak, let's go" will be more than welcome. "Hopefully in five years' time I can be hearing the same chants."

Most consistent of 'Big Three'

Djokovic is by far the most consistent of the 'Big Three' at the Slams. Since the start of 2015, he has won nine of the 19 majors played with Nadal winning four and Federer three. The other three have been split between Stan Wawrinka (two) and Andy Murray (one). On Sunday, Djokovic saved match points in the 16th game of the deciding set, which ran for over two hours and was settled by a 12-12 tiebreak for the first time in a singles match at the tournament.

It was another display of stunning mental fortitude. He has been in similar predicaments in the past against Federer — saving two match points in both of his semi-final victories over the Swiss at the 2010 and 2011 US Opens. "I just try to never lose self-belief, just stay calm, just focus on trying to get the ball back, return, which wasn't serving me very well today. "But in the most important moments, all three tiebreaks I



LONDON: A handout composite picture released by the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club yesterday, shows 2019 Wimbledon Men's singles champion Serbia's Novak Djokovic posing for a photograph with his trophy at the Champions Dinner. —AFP

guess, I found my best game."

He was off the pace for large parts of the final, only carving out his first break points in the eighth game of the fourth set. Federer won more points in the match with 218 to 204, broke serve seven times compared to

three, hit 25 aces to 10 and 94 winners to Djokovic's 54. "I thought I could have played better. But the one thing that probably allowed me to come back and save match points and win this match was the mental stability," admitted the champion. —AFP

Ramsey hopes to emulate Juve Welsh hero

ROME: Aaron Ramsey says that he wants to follow in the footsteps of compatriot and Juventus hero John Charles after the Welshman was unveiled at the Serie A club yesterday. Ramsey will have a tough task emulating Charles, who died in 2004 at the age of 72, as the former Leeds United and Wales player is a bona fide legend in Turin thanks to a hugely successful five-year spell in the late 1950s and early 60s.

Nicknamed 'The Gentle Giant', Charles scored over 100 goals for Juve as they bagged three league titles and two Coppa Italias, and became part of the 'Magic Trio' alongside Omar Sivori and Giampiero Boniperti. "He is an absolute legend over here and for Welsh football as well," Ramsey told reporters. "He is definitely someone I can look up to and hopefully to follow in his footsteps. He definitely took everything in and left his mark here. "I know how much he means to this club and the history that he contributed to here."

Ramsey, 28, made his first appearance as a Juve player in Turin yesterday after signing in February a four-year deal worth a reported seven million euros (\$7.9 million) net a season. Ramsey, who won three FA Cups in his 11 years at Arsenal and played a key role in Wales reaching the semi-finals of Euro 2016, said that the move to the Italian champions, who have won the last eight Serie A titles, was one he couldn't turn down.

"When I knew that Juventus was interested, I couldn't refuse. It's a great club, one of the biggest in the world, and to have the opportunity to come here and play for them is a dream," he said. Ramsey's unveiling comes amid a busy summer for Juventus, who have brought in Maurizio Sarri as coach after removing Massimiliano Allegri at the end of last season. —AFP

Casillas to join Porto staff during recovery

LISBON: Iker Casillas will join the Porto staff while he recovers from the heart attack he suffered two months ago, the Spanish goalkeeper and Portuguese club announced yesterday. In a statement, Porto said Casillas will be the "liaison between the players, coach and management", a role that could be extended to other functions within the club.

"I'm going to do something different from what I used to do, which was to be on the field. I will try to do my best to help my teammates," the 38-year-old told the club website. The former Real Madrid and Spain captain underwent emergency surgery on May 1 after suffering a heart attack during training. He left the hospital five days later, admitting that his professional future was uncertain.

His agent Carlo Cutropia told sports daily O Jogo that he cannot yet resume training and will have to wait for doctors to say whether he can return within "one, two or three months". Casillas joined Porto in 2015 and extended his contract by one year in March. Club president Jorge Pinto da Costa has said he wants Casillas to be playing for Porto at 40. He has 167 Spain caps, winning the 2010 World Cup and two European Championships, and also played more than 700 games for Real Madrid, where he won five La Liga titles, three Champions League and a handful of other major trophies. Since moving to Porto he also added the 2018 Portuguese league title to his heaving trophy cabinet. —AFP

Griezmann says Atletico outcry to move 'is a pity'

BARCELONA: French forward Antoine Griezmann said on Sunday that Atletico Madrid's angry response to his transfer to La Liga rivals Barcelona is "a pity". Barcelona revealed on Friday they had paid the 28-year-old's 120-million-euro (\$135 million) release clause to sign the World Cup winner on a five-year deal, prompting a furious response from Atletico who said the amount was "insufficient".

"Regarding Atletico, it's a pity. I went to see them on purpose so they would not be caught off guard and could prepare for the future," the player told a news conference as he was presented at the Camp Nou. "We reached an agreement but finally it changed, it's like that, you have to accept it," he added when asked about Atletico's response. Shortly after the Catalans had announced the signing, Atletico complained Barcelona and Griezmann had negotiated the deal before the buy-out price dropped from

200 million euros at the start of July.

"Atletico Madrid believe that the termination of the contract took place before the end of last season," the club said, adding Griezmann had made it clear in his actions and words. Atletico had already "begun appropriate procedures" to defend their "rights and legitimate interests", the statement added. Spanish sports newspaper AS said on Saturday the capital city club will go to FIFA, the governing body of world football, to argue that Barcelona owe them more than the 120 million euros release clause deposited by a lawyer for Griezmann on Friday.

The daily added Atletico want to have both Barcelona and Griezmann punished. Contacted by AFP on Saturday, the club refused to comment. Griezmann almost signed with Barcelona a year ago but instead opted in June 2018 to sign a new five-year deal at the Wanda Metropolitan, revealing the reasons why in an almost one-hour long documentary called "The Decision" made by a production company owned by Barcelona defender Gerard Pique.

But in May 2019 he announced he would be leaving Atletico at the end of the season. Griezmann's five-year contract with Barcelona includes a buyout

Rohr insists future remains bright for youthful Nigeria

CAIRO: Gernot Rohr believes Nigeria will be stronger for their experience at this year's Africa Cup of Nations after his side suffered a painful, last-gasp defeat to Algeria in the semi-finals. Nigeria looked to be heading into extra time against a team that required penalties to overcome Ivory Coast just three days earlier, but Riyad Mahrez won the game for Algeria in the 95th minute with a magnificent free-kick.

Coach Rohr said the loss was "tough to digest" for his players but stressed the current crop of Super Eagles had the potential to become "very good" given time. "Our team is progressing well after the World Cup which wasn't bad, we've started work with a rejuvenated team. This team has a future. I'm still under contract for another year and we'll see what happens after that," said the German, whose side was the youngest in Russia last summer.

Nigeria will meet Tunisia on Wednesday in the third-place play-off at

Al Salam Stadium, which could see the likes of youngsters Henry Onyekuru, Samuel Kalu and Victor Osimhen given a chance after limited minutes in Egypt. "We will draw lessons after the third place match. We have a very young team, we're making progress and perhaps we lacked a bit of clear-sightedness (against Algeria) but we're moving forward," continued Rohr.

"We have to work much more. Our midfield is the youngest one. (Wilfred Ndidi, Alex Iwobi and (Peter) Etebo have to learn tactically and they have to make better communication, but I think with time they'll be very good." Rohr praised the resilience shown by his side throughout the tournament, as they responded to a shock loss to Madagascar by toppling defending champions Cameroon and beating South Africa before coming from behind against Algeria.

"I congratulate my players for a big fight against this very good team," said Rohr. "It was a big fight until the last minute." "It was a wonderful match, but we lost it so we are not happy. We scored an own goal which was unlucky but we came back like throughout the tournament when there was something difficult against us. A wonderful free-kick made the difference." He added:

Mercedes van at the club's training ground in the suburbs of the French capital.

PSG officially began pre-season training last Monday but Neymar, linked with a move back to Barcelona, was not there, with the player's camp maintaining he had a prior agreement to stay away. The French champions responded last week by threatening to take "appropriate action" against the world's most expensive player, who said he had stayed in Brazil to attend a charity five-a-side football tournament run by his foundation, the Neymar Institute.

On Saturday, Neymar, who joined PSG for 222 million euros (\$264 million at the time) from Barcelona in 2017, made a series of remarks that strained his relationship further with the club and sparked outrage on social media.



SANT JOAN DESPI: Barcelona's French forward Antoine Griezmann laughs as he runs during the football club's first pre-season training session at the Joan Gamper training ground. —AFP

clause of 800 million euros. "It's always hard to leave a home, a place where you felt comfortable, which is your family," he said. "I only have admiration and respect for the club. I have given everything on the pitch from the beginning to the end of the season and I feel no shame," added Griezmann, who will wear the number 17

jersey for his new side. Griezmann scored 133 goals in 257 appearances for Atletico since he joined them in 2014 from Basque club Real Sociedad, who scouted the attacker when he was just 14. He helped Atletico lift the Europa League in 2018 and won the World Cup with France last year. —AFP



CAIRO: Nigeria's coach Gernot Rohr (L) and his bench stand for the national anthem during the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) quarter final football match between Nigeria and South Africa. —AFP

"The other day we won in the last minute against South Africa, this time we lost. That's football."

The former Gabon, Niger and Burkina Faso boss also praised the work done by Algeria coach Djamel Belmadi, who took over last year after the Desert Foxes finished bottom of their 2018 World Cup

qualifying group. "The result reflects what we saw on the pitch. The best team won," said Rohr. "The match confirms what I said about them making progress. They have made strides both tactically and technically and it's going to be very tight with Senegal but Algeria have all the weapons to win." —AFP

Neymar returns to PSG training with future still unsure

PARIS: Neymar showed up for training at Paris Saint-Germain yesterday, according to French media reports, a week late and days after controversially claiming his best football memory was beating PSG when he played for Barcelona. A video posted on the website of leading sports daily L'Equipe showed the 27-year-old Brazilian — his hair dyed peroxide blonde — getting out of a black

Asked by online sports channel Oh My Goal about his best memory in football, the troubled superstar cited Barcelona's incredible 2017 Champions League victory over PSG when he was part of the team that overturned a 4-0 first-leg deficit by winning 6-1 in the second leg of their last-16 tie.

Earlier in the day, Neymar posted a 10-second video of himself in a Barcelona shirt and a quote from the Bible: "No weapon turned against you will prosper." Neymar's father, who is also the player's representative, later defended his son in an Instagram post, saying: "At no point did my son show a lack of respect to PSG or the players who played in that game in 2017." "My son plays for PSG, but he can't simply ignore his past. A past that led to him arriving at the French club," Neymar Senior added. —AFP