

## Sports

# Djokovic reaches ATP Finals semis by thrashing Rublev

**TURIN:** Novak Djokovic moved into the last four of the ATP Finals for the 10th time with a comfortable victory over Andrey Rublev in Turin on Wednesday. The world number one, bidding to equal Roger Federer's record of six titles at the season-ending event, brushed aside fifth seed Rublev 6-3, 6-2 to secure his 50th match win of the year.

Djokovic, thanks to successive straight-sets victories, has wrapped up top spot in the Green Group. "I served well (and) that helped tremendously," Djokovic said. "I wanted to put him out of his comfort zone, taking away the time and mix up the pace. It was a great performance overall."

Norway's Casper Ruud overcame British alternate Cameron Norrie 1-6, 6-3, 6-4 in the night match to keep alive his chances of reaching the last four. The 34-year-old Djokovic is looking to cap off a remarkable year which saw him only just miss out on completing a calendar Grand Slam with defeat by Daniil Medvedev in the US Open final. He plays Norrie in his last round-robin match today. A rematch with second-ranked Medvedev in the final in Italy is still a possibility, with the Russian reigning champion sitting top of the Red Group. Djokovic is bidding for back-to-back titles after returning to action earlier this month with success in the Paris Masters, beating Medvedev in the final.

The Serb has not won the ATP Finals since 2015, losing finals in 2016 and 2018 to Andy Murray and Alexander Zverev respectively, while also

falling in an epic last-four clash with Dominic Thiem last year. The 20-time Grand Slam champion was far too strong for Rublev, though, serving 14 aces and hitting 19 winners past his overpowered opponent. He broke twice in each set of a match which lasted just 69 minutes. "Winning the first set, I put additional pressure on him, and I started to maybe play more consistently from the back of the court," Djokovic added.

Earlier, Norrie replaced Stefanos Tsitsipas in

the draw after the Greek star pulled out with an elbow injury. The world number four had refused to comment on the problem after his opening loss to Rublev, but admitted on Wednesday the injury which forced him to retire from his first match in Paris was still hampering him. "I have taken the very difficult decision to retire from the 2021 Finals due to my elbow injury, which has been bothering me for a couple of weeks now," Tsitsipas said. "It's a very difficult decision from my side." —AFP



**TURIN:** Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates after defeating Russia's Andrey Rublev during their first round singles match of the ATP Finals at the Pala Alpitour venue in Turin on Wednesday. — AFP

## Fan favorite

The prestigious event was moved to Guadalajara from Shenzhen, China, because of the coronavirus pandemic, and Muguruza — who won back-to-back titles in Monterrey in 2018 and 2019 — was a favorite of Mexican fans. "Definitely I'm very supported here in Mexico," she said. "I used it this week for sure."



**ZAPOPAN:** Spain's Garbine Muguruza celebrates with the trophy after winning the 2021 WTA Finals Tournament singles final match in Zapopan, Mexico, on Wednesday. — AFP

## Muguruza becomes Spain's first WTA Finals champion

**GUADALAJARA:** Former world number one Garbine Muguruza beat Anett Kontaveit 6-3, 7-5 on Wednesday to become the first Spaniard to win the elite season-ending WTA Finals in Guadalajara, Mexico. Muguruza, winner of the 2016 French Open and 2017 Wimbledon titles, capped a 2021 campaign that saw her return to the highest level with titles in Dubai and Chicago after three years outside of the top 10. The 28-year-old is projected to end the year at number three in the world. "I'm just very happy I proved to myself once again I can be the best, I can be the 'maestra', like how we say in Spanish," she said. "That puts me in a very good position for next year, a good ranking. How can I say? A good energy. It's just the payoff for such a long year," she added. "My team and I worked hard. It pays off. Just shows us that we're doing the right way."

Muguruza said it was a delight to win "such a big, big, big tournament, the Masters, in Latin America, here in Mexico. "I think it's just perfect," she said. Arantxa Sanchez Vicario was the only other Spanish player to reach the WTA Finals championship match, falling to German great Steffi Graf in 1993 at Madison Square Garden in New York.

Muguruza battled back from a break down in the second set, winning the last four games of the match to seal her 10th career title, breaking Kontaveit at love. She notched her second win of the tournament against Kontaveit, having ended the Estonian's 12-match WTA win streak with a must-have round-robin victory on Sunday.

It was the seventh time in WTA Finals history that round-robin opponents have had a rematch in the final. Kontaveit, whose late-season surge included four titles since August — at Cleveland, Ostrava, Moscow and Cluj-Napoca, is projected to reach a career-high ranking of seventh in the world. She had dropped her serve just four times in four matches coming into the final but was broken five times by Muguruza. "I'd like to congratulate Garbine," Kontaveit said as she accepted her runner-up award. "You've beaten me twice this week, that's just too good."

Muguruza takes the crown that Australian Ashleigh Barty won in 2019 in Shenzhen. The Finals were cancelled in 2020 because of the pandemic and Barty opted not to defend her title amid the lingering travel restrictions caused by coronavirus. Other notable absentees included Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka. The doubles title went to the Czech duo of Barbora Krejckova and Katerina Siniakova, who beat Hsieh Su-Wei of Taiwan and Elise Mertens of Belgium 6-3, 6-4. The Czechs finished the tournament unbeaten to claim their fifth title of 2021 — a haul that included their third career Grand Slam doubles title at Roland Garros and an Olympic gold medal in Tokyo. — AFP

## Concern deepens for Chinese tennis star's safety

**BEIJING:** The boss of women's tennis has cast doubt on an email posted on China's media purportedly from tennis star Peng Shuai, saying it "only raises my concerns as to her safety." Steve Simon, chairman of the WTA, said in a statement that he had a "hard time believing" the email was written by Peng, who has not been heard from since alleging two weeks ago that a powerful Chinese politician had sexually assaulted her.

Peng, a former Wimbledon and French Open doubles champion, alleged on the Twitter-like Weibo earlier this month that former vice-premier Zhang Gaoli had "forced" her into sex during a long-term on-off relationship. The claims were quickly scrubbed from social media and she has not been seen since, drawing mounting concern over her wellbeing.

However, state-run CGTN published a screenshot on Twitter of what it said was an email written by Peng to Simon and other WTA officials. In the email, Peng purportedly claims that her earlier accusations of sexual abuse are "not true" and says she is "resting at home and everything is fine."

But doubts were quickly flagged about the language used in the purported email from Peng, which Twitter users noted had a cursor visible in the screenshot posted by CGTN. Simon said he was struggling to believe it was authentic. "The statement released today by Chinese state media concerning Peng Shuai only raises my concerns as to her safety and whereabouts," Simon wrote in a statement.

"I have a hard time believing that Peng Shuai actually wrote the email we received or believes what is being attributed to her," he added. He said he had been repeatedly trying to reach her via numerous forms of communication, to no avail. He called for "independent and verifiable proof that she is safe".

On November 2, Peng wrote on social media that Zhang — who is in his seventies — "forced" her into sex and said they had an on-off relationship lasting several years. The post appeared to have been deleted quickly, however, sparking swift accusations from critics of Beijing of online censorship.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka said Wednesday that she was in "shock" about the case, with Novak Djokovic and numerous other players in recent days saying they were deeply worried about her. American player Jessica Pegula tweeted yesterday that she hoped the WTA "continues to show what we stand for as players." "I hope more people, not just tennis players, shed some light on this deeply concerning situation," she wrote. China's national tennis association has not responded to AFP requests for comment. — AFP