



NEW YORK: Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates his win over USA's Jenson Brooksby during their 2021 US Open Tennis tournament men's singles fourth round match at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in New York, on Monday. — AFP

Djokovic tested but wins at US Open to advance Slam quest

NEW YORK: Novak Djokovic struggled but advanced within three matches of completing the first men's singles calendar-year Grand Slam in 52 years on Monday by outlasting American Jenson Brooksby at the US Open. World number one Djokovic rallied past 99th-ranked Brooksby 1-6, 6-3, 6-2, 6-2 to book a quarter-final encounter with Italian sixth seed Matteo Berrettini in a rematch of July's Wimbledon final.

"It's going to be exciting," Djokovic said. "He loves the big stage. Big serve, big game overall. I know what to expect. Going to try to prepare a good game plan and hope for the best." The 34-year-old Serbian star would become the first man since Rod Laver in 1969 to sweep all four major titles in the same year by capturing his fourth career US Open crown.

Djokovic also seeks a men's singles record 21st Slam trophy, which would boost him one ahead of "Big Three" rivals Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, both absent with injuries. An epic shocker seemed possible when Brooksby, a 20-year-old American wildcard who hadn't played Djokovic before, broke in the second and sixth games and fired a service winner to claim the first set in 29 minutes.

"He just played a perfect first set," Djokovic

said. "I could do nothing. I was still finding my footing on the court. I must say it wasn't a great start. Jenson was pumped. He had a clear game plan. He was executing his shots tremendously. I was on my back foot. He was reading the play well for a set and a half."

Djokovic broke in the second game of the second set, but was broken in a electrifying 20-minute fifth game, netting a backhand on Brooksby's sixth break chance. "Definitely I had confidence I could beat him," Brooksby said.

But Djokovic broke back in the sixth game, ripping a cross-court forehand winner for a 4-2 lead, and held from there to take the 68-minute set. "After that, I started hitting more cleanly and through the court," said Djokovic. "Whenever I needed a serve I found my spot well. It was physical, a lot of exhausting rallies."

In all, Djokovic won 15 of the last 20 games, rolling to victory in the stamina test after two hours and 59 minutes. Berrettini advanced by

defeating 144th-ranked German qualifier Oscar Otte 6-4, 3-6, 6-3, 6-2.

Olympic champs advance

Tokyo Olympic champions Alexander Zverev and Belinda Bencic advanced with straight-set triumphs, as did British 18-year-old qualifier Emma Raducanu. German fourth seed Zverev stretched his win streak to 15 matches by beating Italian 13th seed Jannik Sinner 6-4, 6-4, 7-6 (9/7).

Swiss 11th seed Bencic eliminated Polish seventh seed Iga Swiatek, last year's French Open champion, 7-6 (14/12), 6-3. And 150th-ranked Raducanu ripped 43rd-ranked American Shelby Rogers 6-2, 6-1 in 66 minutes.

Raducanu is only the third qualifier to reach the US Open women's quarter-finals after Estonia's Kaia Kanepi in 2017 and American Barbara Gerken in 1981.

Zverev, last year's US Open runner-up, reached his seventh career Slam quarter-final and fourth in

the past five Slams. He saved two set points on his serve in the 12th game of the third set and three more in the tie-breaker before Sinner netted a forehand to end matters after two hours and 25 minutes.

"That's the last few months for me," Zverev said. "Players with confidence know what to do in these situations. I'm happy to get through in straight sets." He will next face 46th-ranked Lloyd Harris of South Africa, who eliminated US 22nd seed Reilly Opelka 6-7 (6/8), 6-4, 6-1, 6-3.

Swiatek beat Bencic in their only prior meeting in February's Adelaide final, but the Swiss hasn't dropped a set. "I've improved my game a lot," Bencic said. "I'm glad to turn it around and get through." Bencic next plays Raducanu, a US Open debutant who hasn't dropped a set in four matches. "Belinda is a great player who is in great form," Raducanu said. "I'm going to just have to bring it."

Czech fourth seed Karolina Pliskova, this year's Wimbledon runner-up, beat Russian 14th seed Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova 7-5, 6-4. She next faces Greek 17th seed Maria Sakkari, who ousted 2019 US Open winner Bianca Andreescu 6-7 (2/7), 7-6 (8/6), 6-3. The Canadian sixth seed was limping with a left thigh injury in the final games before suffering her first US Open loss after three hours and 30 minutes. — AFP



Zverev, Bencic advance with straight sets

Russell confirmed as Hamilton's new teammate at Mercedes

LONDON: George Russell was confirmed as Lewis Hamilton's new teammate at Formula One team Mercedes for next season yesterday after Valtteri Bottas sealed a switch to Alfa Romeo. The 23-year-old British driver earned his much-anticipated move to the Silver Arrows, with whom he has signed a long-term deal, after catching the eye during three years with Williams.

He also impressed in a one-off appearance for Mercedes at last year's Sakhir Grand Prix as a stand-in for seven-time world champion Hamilton, who had tested positive for coronavirus. Russell, who will form an all-British line-up with Hamilton, said it was a "special day".

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't absolutely buzzing," he said in a Mercedes statement. "It's a huge opportunity and one I want to grab with both hands. But I'm under no illusions as to the scale of the challenge. It's going to be a steep learning curve."

He added: "I've looked up to Lewis since I was in go-karts and the opportunity to learn from someone who has become a role model both on and off track can only benefit me as a driver, a professional, and a human being."

Hamilton, who is currently second in this year's driver standings, three points behind Red Bull's Max Verstappen, welcomed his future teammate. "Through hard work he has rightly earned his spot," tweeted the 37-year-old reigning world

champion, who on Monday paid a warm tribute to the departing Bottas. "I look forward to seeing him grow as a driver with this great team and working with him to raise @MercedesAMGF1 higher. See you next year."

Mercedes boss Toto Wolff said it had not been a straightforward decision, praising Bottas for his contribution to the team's success over the past five seasons. "Looking forward to 2022, we are very happy to confirm that George will have the opportunity to take the next step in his career and join Mercedes," he added.

"He has been a winner in every racing category — and the past three seasons with Williams have given us a taste of what the future could hold for him in F1. Now, it is our challenge together to help him continue learning within our environment and alongside Lewis, the greatest F1 driver of all time."

Bottas, 32, has spent the past five seasons alongside Hamilton at Mercedes, having replaced Nico Rosberg, who retired after winning the 2016 title. The Finn has won nine races and claimed 17 pole positions with the team but has not consistently been able to challenge Hamilton. Alfa Romeo announced on Monday that Bottas had signed a multi-year deal to join the team from 2022.

Alpha Tauri retains drivers

Elsewhere, Alpha Tauri announced yesterday that Japanese youngster Yuki Tsunoda and Frenchman Pierre Gasly will stay with the team for the 2022 Formula One season. The 21-year-old Tsunoda has impressed in his rookie season, winning 18 points with a best finish of sixth at the Hungarian Grand Prix. Gasly has been with Alpha Tauri since joining in 2017, except for a short stint with sister team Red Bull in 2019.

"I have a very good relationship with Pierre. I

have learnt a lot from him already this year and his experience has helped me to keep developing my own skills, so it's great to be continuing my F1 journey with him," said Tsunoda. Next season will see the introduction of new regulations in F1 which are expected to give the smaller teams a chance of closing the gap to the recent front-runners.

"Consistency and stability are crucial heading into the new era of F1, with the introduction of the 2022 regulations," said Alpha Tauri in a statement. "The team believes that the current duo will be

able to deliver good results."

Gasly, who was dropped by Red Bull midway through the 2019 campaign, has been in excellent form since, notching three podium finishes including his maiden victory at last year's Italian Grand Prix. "I'm very excited to see what we can accomplish in the new era of F1 and to keep working with the team as best as I can to bring us forward in the team standings," said the 25-year-old. Gasly sits eighth in the 2021 drivers' standings with 66 points. — AFP



MOGYOROD: In this file photo taken on August 1, 2021, Williams' British driver George Russell looks on during a 'We Race As One' ceremony ahead of the Formula One Hungarian Grand Prix at the Hungaroring race track in Mogyorod near Budapest. — AFP