

Ruthless Barty books first Open final

Barty to meet powerhouse Collins in Australian Open final



MELBOURNE: Australia's Ashleigh Barty hits a shot against Madison Keys of the US during their women's singles semi-final match on day eleven of the Australian Open tennis tournament yesterday. (Inset) Danielle Collins of the US hits a return against Poland's Iga Swiatek during their women's singles semi-final match. — AFP

MELBOURNE: A ruthless Ashleigh Barty swept into her first Australian Open final yesterday with a clinical, straight-sets demolition of Madison Keys to set-up a title match with the hard-hitting Danielle Collins. The world number one overwhelmed 51st-ranked Keys 6-1, 6-3 in just 62 minutes with another American awaiting after the all-business Collins crushed Polish seventh seed Iga Swiatek 6-4, 6-1.

Barty is the first Australian woman into the decider of her home Grand Slam since Wendy Turnbull in 1980 and is aiming to become the first winner since Chris O'Neil two years earlier. But the tenacious Collins stands in her way on Saturday with the 28-year-old enjoying a second coming after surgery last year for endometriosis left her pain free. Nine months on and she has 32-7 win-loss record, capturing her maiden WTA singles titles last year in Palermo then San Jose.

After making the semi-finals at Melbourne in

2019, she is now in a first Slam final and will break into the top 10 for the first time to cap a remarkable comeback. "To play against the number one player in the world in her home country, it's going to be spectacular," said Collins of the final. "I couldn't be happier. It's been such a journey, so many years of hard work." Barty, though, has been rampant so far, dropping serve just once through six matches and is yet to drop a set as she powered through the top half of the women's draw.

She is also looking to add to her 2019 French Open and 2021 Wimbledon titles and is on a 10-match win streak to start the year. "To be in the finals weekend of your home Grand Slam is what a lot of Aussie players dream of. Yeah, it's going to be an incredible experience come Saturday," said Barty. "Obviously I was able to make Maddie uncomfortable and make her press, and that was kind of part of the plan, as well. I felt like we did a

really good job all in all of playing the match in kind of our terms." Barty paid tribute to Keys, a former top-10 player who is on the rise again after some difficult years. "It's just so nice to see her back where she belongs," said Barty. "She's an amazing human being."

The top seed, who played cricket with her team on Wednesday to relax, was once more in full command of her game with an attacking forehand and lethal backhand slice. The Australian immediately pressured Keys' serve to create a break point that she converted with a cross-court winner to assert early control. She consolidated as Keys struggled to get her racquet on the ball and the American was broken again in the fifth game.

Keys finally won her first points on the Barty serve in the next game, but it was a blip as the Australian stormed 5-1 in front before a double fault handed her two set points and she slammed a

forehand return to convert. It went with serve to 2-2 in set two before Barty stepped up a gear, with a passing shot earning another break to 4-2 clear and there was no way back for the American. Collins also flew out of the blocks against former French Open champion Swiatek, racing to a 4-0 first set lead.

A nervous Swiatek double faulted in the opening game to gift Collins an early break and the unrelenting American's fierce groundstrokes earned her another. But the gutsy Pole fought back as Collins double faulted to give a break-point opportunity. But the all-action American, who opted not to sit down and rest at each change of ends, recomposed herself to serve out the set. Collins was now on a mission and quickly broke to take charge of the second set as she jumped on Swiatek's second serve, breaking again to race 3-0 clear and it was all over for the 20-year-old. — AFP

Surging Cavaliers surprise Bucks as Suns scorch Jazz

LOA ANGELES: The Cleveland Cavaliers continued their NBA resurgence Wednesday with a 115-99 victory over the reigning champion Milwaukee Bucks that helped propel them into third place in the Eastern Conference. As the Miami Heat maintained their hold on top spot in the east with a 110-96 victory over the New York Knicks, the Cavs slipped ahead of the Bucks and into fourth with their eighth win in nine games.

They moved up another spot when the short-handed Brooklyn Nets fell to Nikola Jokic and the Denver Nuggets 124-118. It's not so tight at the top in the West, where the Phoenix Suns improved their league-leading record with a 105-97 victory over the Utah Jazz. Devin Booker scored 43 points to lead the Suns, setting a franchise record with the 16th 40-point game of his career.

He signaled his intentions with 21 points in the first quarter, three more than the Jazz managed as the Suns took a 39-18 lead. Utah responded and trailed by just two at halftime. Down by 10 heading into the fourth quarter, the Jazz cut the deficit to two points with 2:14 to play only for the Suns to pull away for an eighth straight win. In Cleveland, Kevin Love scored 25 points, Cedi Osman added 23 and the Cavaliers drained 19 three-pointers as they continued their impressive run of form.

"It was huge," veteran Love said of the victory over the reigning champions. "We beat a very, very good team tonight." "And if we stay true to our principles and true to who we are as a team, I think the sky's the limit for us," Love added. Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Giannis Antetokounmpo returned from a one-game injury absence to score 26 points for Milwaukee. But the Greek star had seven of the Bucks' 19 turnovers -



CLEVELAND: Khris Middleton #22 of the Milwaukee Bucks shoots against Isaac Okoro #35 and Cedi Osman #16 of the Cleveland Cavaliers during the fourth quarter on January 26, 2022. — AFP

which led to 31 Cavaliers points. Bobby Portis scored 22 points and Khris Middleton chipped in 21 for the Bucks, who led by 12 in the first quarter, trailed by eight at halftime and never led in the second half. In Miami, Duncan Robinson led the Heat with 25 points, Jimmy Butler scored 22 and Tyler Herro returned after missing three games over COVID concerns to score 21 off the bench as the Heat led wire-to-wire against the Knicks. They maintained a half-game lead atop the East over the Chicago Bulls, who beat the Toronto Raptors 111-105.

The Nets, third in the East going into the night, were still without injured Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving - whose decision not to be vaccinated for COVID-19 means he cannot play home games. James Harden, who had a 33-point triple-double in a loss to the Lakers on Tuesday, sat out with a sore hamstring, but the Nets still managed to challenge a Nuggets team led by reigning MVP Jokic's 26 points and 10 rebounds. The Nets led 65-54 after a first half that featured 14 lead changes. But Denver out-scored them 42-26 in the third quarter and never trailed in the fourth.

Elsewhere, the Charlotte Hornets made 24 three-pointers in a 158-126 victory over the Washington Wizards on Tuesday, rallied again to beat the Magic 111-102 in Orlando. The Clippers erased a 14-point deficit - small change compared with the 35-point hole they escaped against Washington - and out-scored Orlando 35-24 in the fourth quarter to get to 25-25 for the season. Amir Coffey scored 19 points and Luke Kennard, whose four-point play sealed Tuesday's win, added 17. — AFP

Japan beat China; 4th straight World Cup qualifying win

SAITAMA: Japan beat China 2-0 yesterday to continue their resurgence in World Cup qualifying with their fourth straight win. Yuya Osako buried a first-half penalty to put the four-time Asian champions in control in Saitama, north of Tokyo, before Junya Ito doubled their lead after the break. The win meant Japan stayed second in Group B behind leaders Saudi Arabia, who they host at the same stadium next Tuesday.

But Australia remained one point behind Japan in the battle for the two automatic qualifying places for Qatar, after a comfortable 4-0 home win over Vietnam. Japan took a 13th-minute lead after China defender Wang Shenchao slid in to block Junya Ito's cross but hit the ball with his arm. Osako made no mistake from the penalty spot despite China

goalkeeper Yan Junling diving the right way. The hosts pressed home their advantage in the 61st minute when Ito rose to head home substitute Yuta Nakayama's cross.

China, who were playing their first game under new manager Li Xiaopeng, saw their slim hopes of reaching the World Cup all but ended by the defeat. Australia, with manager Graham Arnold absent after testing positive for Covid-19, made light work of Vietnam in Melbourne. Jamie McLaren opened the scoring in the 30th minute before Tom Rogic notched a second in first-half injury time. Craig Goodwin and Riley McGree added two more after the break to wrap up the win for the home side. Whipping boys Vietnam stayed bottom of the group with no points from seven games. — AFP



SAITAMA: Japan's Yuya Osako (left) and China's Zheng Zheng (center) compete for the ball during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Asian zone qualification football match yesterday. — AFP