

Battling Barty breaks 44-year hoodoo

Barty drought in 'dream come true' Australian Open



MELBOURNE: Australia's Ashleigh Barty poses with the runner up Danielle Collins of the US after the women's singles final match on day thirteen of the Australian Open tennis tournament yesterday. — AFP

MELBOURNE: An imperious Ashleigh Barty said it was a dream come true after yesterday becoming the first Australian to win her home Grand Slam in 44 years, but the memories made along the way were more important than the trophy. The world number one was 5-1 down in the second set against fearless American Danielle Collins but came storming back to win on a tiebreak and sweep past the 27th seed 6-3, 7-6 (7/2) and be crowned Australian Open champion.

It was a third Slam title for the 25-year-old after her breakthrough French Open success in 2019 and Wimbledon last year, joining Serena Williams as the only active players to win majors on all three surfaces. "It's a dream come true for me and I'm just so proud to be an Aussie," said Barty. "It's incredible, time and time again we've come so close and now to have my hands on such a beautiful trophy after an exceptional fortnight is just unbelievable."

"But for me it's about the memories more than the trophies, it's the memories we make from the whole journey," she added. "We (her team) often

talk about it being this incredible journey, this great adventure. It's about making those things happen along the way and really enjoying it."

Barty achieved the feat with Christine O'Neil, the last Australian man or woman to win an Australian Open singles, watching in the stadium. O'Neil won the title in 1978 and told reporters before the match: "I'm probably her (Barty's) biggest fan. I'd be happy to hand it over to her because she's so deserving of it." There were fears Barty might be overwhelmed by the weight of expectation, but the Australian has dealt with intense pressure before, none more so than at Wimbledon last year.

Tactical acumen

Winning at the All England Club was the one trophy she wanted more than any others, and she handled the occasion with aplomb. She applied the same tactical acumen with the resurgent Collins, who has enjoyed a new lease of life after surgery last year for endometriosis left her pain free, storm-

ing to her first two WTA titles. "Big congratulations to Ash on a formidable tournament, a formidable few years really," said an emotional Collins, who is projected to break into the top 10 for the first time when the new rankings come out on Monday. "The way you play and the variety of shots, hopefully I can implement some of that into my game."

Barty countered the 28-year-old's power-hitting and big serves with her dizzying array of slices, pinpoint serving, speed and a seamless forehand, but she had a major fright. Both players comfortably held their early service games, offering few chances. But Collins' heavy groundstrokes were causing problems for the top seed. She worked the first deuce with Barty serving at 2-2 and a wayward forehand handed her the opening break point of the night. The Australian held firm and served out with an ace.

Crowd roaring

Barty stepped up a gear and put pressure on the Collins serve to earn her first break point with a net

volley, and the American double faulted under pressure to go 4-2 behind. With the crowd roaring her on, Barty raced home 6-3. But Collins wasn't done and came storming back, breaking Barty for 2-0 in the second set—only the second break of serve against the Australian in the tournament. And while Barty made a statement by winning her next service game to love, the American was pumped and broke again for 5-1.

Barty was in deep trouble but incredibly found a way back, breaking for 2-5 with some crisp winners then breaking again for 4-5 as Collins floundered serving for the set for a second time. It went to a tiebreak, where Barty was always in control as she carved out her own little piece of history. "I think I just tried to get a lot more aggressive," she said on facing a 5-1 deficit and the possibility of being taken to a third set for the first time in the tournament. "Just from those couple of games from 5-1, I just wanted to try and get some momentum going and try and control the court a bit more." — AFP

Polarizing 'chess player' Medvedev harbors dark side

MELBOURNE: For someone most often said to play tennis as if it were chess, Daniil Medvedev has had a white-knuckle ride into today's Australian Open final. The quirky Russian world number two has polarized crowds, been taken to the brink, survived match point, staged amazing comebacks, had a furious meltdown with a chair umpire and yet he is into his fourth Grand Slam final.

Never afraid to speak his mind or vent his frustrations, 25-year-old Medvedev is closing on Novak Djokovic's world number one ranking and is making his impact in world tennis. He does it in his own distinctive style. Supremely confident in his ability, forthright, playing the unorthodox shot at critical stages of a match, but never dull, always unpredictable.

Medvedev is fast approaching becoming Russia's greatest men's player. Should he conquer Grand Slam titan Rafael Nadal in the Australian Open final he will have won two majors to be equal with his country's tennis elite, Yevgeny Kafelnikov and Marat Safin. His gangly, elastic shot-making make him a tricky opponent, with a trusty two-fisted backhand and unconventional approach to constructing points. Grand Slam champion and analyst Mats Wilander describes Medvedev as a "chess player on a tennis court."

"He's a chess player. He hits the shot that he thinks is right for the moment, not because of where the score is. He's just a really good tactician on court," Wilander said. Medvedev is a cerebral character. He excelled in physics and maths at school, graduating early and enrolling at a university in his native Moscow to study applied eco-

nomics and commerce. He keeps opponents guessing with his flat and low groundstrokes, while changing up the pace and angles, blending impenetrable defense with opportunistic offence.

Dark side

But with the package comes a dark side to Medvedev. His vein-popping tirade at chair umpire Jaume Campistol during his semi-final with frosty rival Stefanos Tsitsipas was startling. Campistol had handed him a code violation for a "visible obscenity", which triggered Medvedev at the changeover. In an extraordinary meltdown Medvedev yelled "Bro, are you mad?" "For what? And his (Tsitsipas) father can talk every point?" He became more agitated repeating himself over again.

Then came the jaw-dropping: "Answer my question. Oh my God, you are so bad, man. How can you be so bad in the semi-final of a grand slam? Look at me, I am talking to you. Give him (a) coaching (violation) because his father is talking every point." As Medvedev left his chair to return to the court he warned Campistol: "If you don't (give him a coaching warning)... you are-how can I say it—a small cat." He was subsequently fined \$12,000 by Tennis Australia for the blowup. Medvedev later said he regretted the meltdown. "I regret it all the time, because I don't think it's nice. I know that every referee is trying to do their best."

Medvedev, in trying to explain why he is so highly strung on the court, added: "I can get really emotional. I have been working on it. 'I think if we look back at myself five years ago when I started playing there was less attention on me, but I was just insanely crazy.' He has the innate ability to wind up opponents and spectators alike with his take-no-prisoners approach. So another opportunity at the Australian Open for Medvedev to make his impact on the men's game. "It's been definitely emotional. It's been a great run, and I'm happy that I have the chance for the title." — AFP

Nadal goes for historic 21st Slam; Medvedev can be spoiler again

MELBOURNE: Rafael Nadal is chasing a record 21st Grand Slam crown in today's Australian Open final but Daniil Medvedev is once again ready to act as the spoiler. The Russian world number two upset Novak Djokovic in last year's US Open final to prevent the Serbian's calendar Grand Slam bid and scuppered his attempt to move ahead of Nadal and Roger Federer on the all-time list of men's major winners. Apart from the 21st major title, Nadal is also bidding to become only the fourth man to win each of the four Grand Slams twice.

At 35 will be the third oldest man in the Open Era to win a Grand Slam title, behind Ken Rosewall and Federer. "For me at the end it's about more than all these statistics, it's about being in the final of the Australian Open one more time. That means a lot to me," Nadal said. "To me it's more important to be in the final and fight to win another Australian Open than the rest of the statistics for the history of the sport. "I am facing my most difficult rival of the whole tournament in the final."

The quirky Russian is relishing the chance to block Nadal getting to 21 majors ahead of his "Big Three" rivals, as he did with Djokovic four months ago. "It's a great rivalry. I'm happy to have the chance to try to stop one more time somebody from making history," Medvedev said after reaching his second straight Australian Open final. He lost to Djokovic last year. "I'm just trying to focus on doing my job. Of course, I'm not lying, I know what's happening, I know what Rafa is going for, I knew what Novak was going for."

While much of the sentimental interest is in Nadal's remarkable comeback from last year's injury-ravaged season to reach his sixth Australian final and 29 overall in Grand Slams, Medvedev is still standing after a turbulent tournament. He had to negotiate the explosive



MELBOURNE: Spain's Rafael Nadal serves against Italy's Matteo Berrettini during their men's singles semi-final match on day twelve of the Australian Open tennis tournament. — AFP

Australian Nick Kyrgios and a partisan home crowd, come through two long sapping battles in the heat with Maxime Cressy and Felix Auger-Aliassime before overcoming frosty rival Stefanos Tsitsipas in the semi-final. Each time the 25-year-old Russian has found a solution in his 17 and a half hours on court. He now has one more problem to solve in Nadal.

"I think it's gonna be a great battle, probably a physical match. Rafa likes to drag people into long rallies. I like it too," he said. "Rafa, we know that from the first till the last point he's gonna fight his best, and that's what I'm gonna try to do also." Nadal leads Medvedev 3-1, with the Russian losing to the Spanish leftie in his first major final at the 2019 US Open over five sets. "Now I have the chance to play him a second time. First one was a close one, an epic one," Medvedev said. — AFP