



WIMBLEDON: Spain's Rafael Nadal returns the ball to Lithuania's Ricardas Berankis during their men's singles tennis match on the fourth day of the 2022 Wimbledon Championships on June 30, 2022. —AFP

Nadal centre stage at Wimbledon as COVID forces third withdrawal

Agut becomes the third player to withdraw from Championships

LONDON: Rafael Nadal tops the bill at Wimbledon on Thursday after Roberto Bautista Agut became the third player to withdraw from the Championships following a positive coronavirus test. In early results on the fourth day of the tournament, women's fourth seed Paula Badosa set up a third-round clash against two-time winner Petra Kvitova.

Second seed Nadal, hunting a rare calendar Grand Slam, takes on Lithuanian journeyman Ricardas Berankis in the second round on Centre Court with his path to the semi-finals opening up. Spanish 17th seed Bautista Agut became the third potential dangerman in Nadal's half of the draw to pull out with COVID, following the withdrawals of 2021 runner-up Matteo Berrettini and 2017 finalist Marin Cilic. "Today I have notified @Wimbledon of my withdrawal. I have tested positive for Covid-19," tweeted the 34-year-old Bautista Agut, a semi-finalist in 2019.

"Fortunately, the symptoms are not very serious, but I think it is the best decision. Thanks for your support. I hope to come back soon." His exit means that Colombia's Daniel Elahi Galan receives a walkover into the last 32. Wimbledon was cancelled in 2020 due to the pandemic while the 2021 edition was run at reduced capacity with players confined to a bubble, but this year it is back to business as usual at the All England Club.

Nadal has also benefited from a shock first-round exit for Canada's sixth seed Felix Auger-Aliassime, who took him to five sets at the French Open. The major threat to the Spaniard's hopes for a third Wimbledon crown on his side of the draw is Greek fourth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas, who plays

Australia's Jordan Thompson. Nadal, 36, is halfway to a calendar Slam after winning the Australian Open and French Open this year. The feat has not been achieved since 1969.

The 22-time Grand Slam champion struggled with crippling foot pain at Roland Garros but has received treatment aimed at reducing the pain and was moving freely in his first-round match on Tuesday. Seeds are also tumbling on the other side of the men's draw, with notable early losers including third seed Casper Ruud and last year's semi-finalist Hubert Hurkacz. But top seed Novak Djokovic, seeking to draw level with Pete Sampras on seven Wimbledon titles, is already safely through to the last 32.

Badosa sets up Kvitova clash

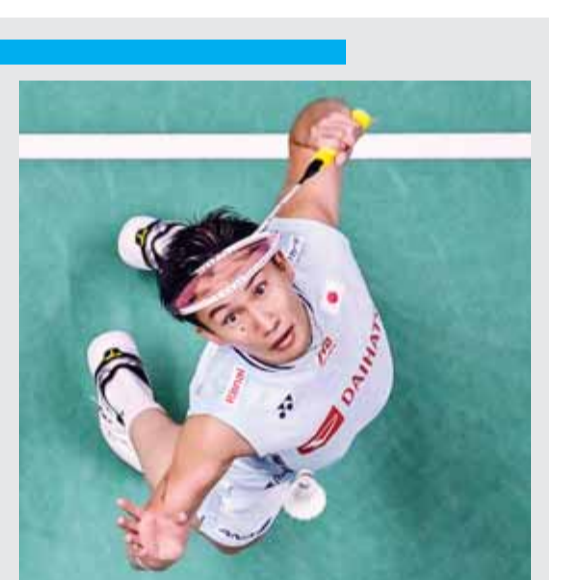
In the women's tournament, Badosa beat Romania's Irina Bara 6-3, 6-2 while Czech 25th seed Kvitova came through 6-1, 7-6 (7/5) against Ana Bogdan, also from Romania. Kvitova, who won Wimbledon in 2011 and 2014, blew a 5-1 lead in the second set but held her nerve to come out on top in the tie-break. Badosa said she expected a tough contest against Kvitova, who won the Eastbourne tournament on grass last week. "She plays very well on grass," said the Spaniard. "She won last week. I practice with her on grass, as well, so I know what I'm going to find out there. "She has confidence as well, but I think I have the game that I could play a tough match against her. Of course I think I will have my opportunities there."

Top seed Iga Swiatek, who has won her past six tournaments, takes on Dutch player Lesley Pattinama Kerkhove, looking to extend her winning run to 37



WIMBLEDON: Spain's Paula Badosa returns the ball to Romania's Irina Bara during their women's singles tennis match on the fourth day of the 2022 Wimbledon Championships at The All England Tennis Club in Wimbledon on June 30, 2022. —AFP

matches. "It's amazing for me to have that kind of streak," said the 21-year-old French Open champion. "It just shows how much work we've been putting for every match. "I'm pretty happy that I could show consistency because it was always my goal." Simona Halep, the 2019 champion, plays Belgium's Kirsten Flipkens while 11th seed Coco Gauff faces Romania's Mihaela Buzarnescu. —AFP



Japan's Kento Momota

Malaysia Open: Japan's Momota claws through

KUALA LUMPUR: Japanese badminton ace Kento Momota narrowly pulled through his first Malaysian match in over two years on Thursday as he recovers from a car accident in 2020 that sent his career spiralling downwards. In a nail-biting encounter lasting 55 minutes, the world number two beat Hong Kong's Angus Ng Ka-long 11-21, 21-8, 21-18 in the second round at the Malaysia Open.

Momota walked into Kuala Lumpur's Axiata Arena the fresher of the pair after his opponent in the first round, Thailand's Kantaphon Wangcharoen, forfeited their game on Wednesday. Cries of "Momota, Momota" greeted the former two-time world champion from the mostly Malaysian crowd as he and Ng - ranked 13th in the world - took to the court.

But victory did not come easily for Momota with unforced errors forcing the 27-year-old to tumble 11-21 in the first set. Recovering in the second game, Momota then dominated Ng 21-8 and kept his nerve to win 21-18 in a tight final contest. Momota's career took a hit in January 2020 when he was involved in a road accident just hours after his victory at the Malaysia Masters, a tragedy that killed his driver and left Momota with a fractured eye socket.

Out of action for a year, the left-hander has found it hard to bounce back from injury, flopping at the Tokyo Olympics and losing in the first round at four of five singles tournaments he has entered this year. Momota, who last triumphed in Malaysia in 2020, will next face Indonesia's world number 26 Shesar Hiren Rhustavito in the last eight. —AFP

Kuwait thump Najma to clinch handball trophy

HYDERABAD, India: Kuwait Club of Kuwait ended Bahrain's Najma Club's season-long unbeaten run by defeating them 28-23 in the final of the 24th Asian Men's Club League Handball Championship. Kuwait, beaten by Najma by just one point in their group game earlier in the tournament, first gained a lead of 5-3 in the 8th minute of the game and never relinquished the advantage, winning easily in the end.

The Asian Men's Club League Handball Championship (AHF Club League Championship) is the official competition organized by Asian Handball Federation for the men's handball clubs of Asia, and takes place every year. In addition to crowning the Asian champions, the tournament also serves as a qualifying tournament for the IHF Super Globe. —Agencies



HYDERABAD, India: Kuwait Club of Kuwait team members celebrate after beating Bahrain's Najma Club's 28-23.