



MIAMI: The Boston Celtics celebrate with the Bob Cousy Eastern Conference Championship Trophy after Game 7 of the 2022 NBA Playoffs Eastern Conference Finals on May 29, 2022. —AFP

Celtics overcome Heat in game 7

Boston Celtics set up a title showdown against Warriors

MIAMI: The Boston Celtics, sparked by 26 points from Jayson Tatum, advanced to the NBA Finals by defeating Miami 100-96 on Sunday, setting up a title showdown against the Golden State Warriors. Boston captured the winner-takes-all matchup to claim the best-of-seven Eastern Conference finals 4-3 and secure a place in the championship series, which begins Thursday in San Francisco. "We aren't satisfied. We've still got a long way to go," Tatum said. "We know we have a tough task ahead. I'm looking forward to it." The Celtics, who eliminated 2021 NBA champion Milwaukee in seven games, led from start to finish but had to hold off a Heat fightback in the dying minutes to reach their first NBA Finals since 2010.

"We fought through a lot of adversity," Celtics coach Ime Udoka said. "We're a resilient group. We can't ever really slam the door but we held them off. 'Now our focus is to win four more.'" Boston advanced after losing the conference finals three times in the past five seasons. "To get over the hump with this group, it means every-

thing," Tatum said. "Not a lot of people believed in us, but it worked out." Tatum, who also had 10 rebounds and six assists, was named the Eastern Conference Most Valuable Player.

"It was the biggest game of my career," Tatum said. "Going through those tough times helped us grow, helped us learn. They kept coming at us. We kept responding. We left it all on the floor. We got it done." Marcus Smart and Jaylen Brown each added 24 points for Boston while Jimmy Butler led Miami with 35 points in a losing cause. "Not good enough. I didn't do enough," Butler said. "Stats don't mean anything. I learned I have to be better and I will be better. We're going to come back better than ever."

Miami, the East's top seed, missed a chance at a second NBA Finals trip in three years and a first title since 2013. "It's one of the worst feelings in the world to address your locker room after a game like this," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "It's heartbreaking when it

ends like this." Golden State split two games with the Celtics in the regular season, winning 111-107 in December at Boston and losing 110-88 in March at home when star guard Stephen Curry was injured.

Boston hadn't been to the finals since losing 12 years ago to the Los Angeles Lakers. The Celtics haven't won the NBA crown since 2008. The Warriors, in the NBA Finals for the sixth time in eight years, seek their fourth title in that span and the first since 2018. "This is a great opportunity. This is what you put all the work in for your whole life," Brown said. "We've got to embrace it but also embrace the challenge. 'We're playing a team that has been there, done that before. We've got to come with our A-game.'"

'We persevered'

Smart had six points in a 10-1 spurt by Boston for a 65-52 Celtics lead early in the third quarter, but a 7-0 Heat run soon after pulled Miami within 72-65 and the

Celtics carried an 82-75 lead into the final quarter. An 8-0 Celtics run early in the fourth quarter lifted Boston ahead 90-79, the Heat missing nine shots in a row. "We had plenty of opportunities. We just couldn't get control of the game," Spoelstra said. "Most of the game we were grinding." Max Strus's three-pointer closed an 11-0 run to lift Miami within 98-96 in the dying seconds, but Butler missed a late three-pointer. Smart hit two free throws and the Celtics held on.

"We've been responding all year to adversity," Brown said. "Today was the biggest test of the year, of our careers, and we got past it. 'We persevered. We got the job done.'" Boston's Al Horford, a 35-year-old Dominican center, played 44 minutes and grabbed a game-high 14 rebounds to reach his first NBA Finals. "I'm happy to be sharing this moment with these guys," Horford said. "This is a special group." Butler, who had 24 first-half points, played all 48 minutes. "We just couldn't afford to have him off the court," Spoelstra said. —AFP



PARIS: This combination of file photos shows (left) Serbia's Novak Djokovic and Spain's Rafael Nadal in Paris. —AFP

Djokovic braced to deliver Nadal hammer blow

PARIS: Novak Djokovic renews his epic 16-year rivalry with Rafael Nadal at the French Open on Tuesday with a semi-final spot at stake and where victory could end the 13-time champion's Roland Garros career. Nadal, who will turn 36 on Friday, puts his record of 109 wins and just three losses in Paris, since his title-winning debut in 2005, on the line against the defending champion.

The Spaniard was taken to five sets for only the third time in his tournament history by 21-year-old Felix Auger-Aliassime in the fourth round. In the immediate aftermath of that victory, Nadal admitted that not only was this year's French Open at stake for him but possibly his entire playing future. "I know my situation, and I accept it. I can't complain much," said Nadal, who arrived in Paris unsure if he would be able to take part after suffering a recurrence in Rome of a chronic foot injury which has plagued him for large parts of his career.

"I am just enjoying the fact that I am here for one more year. And being honest, every match that I play here, I don't know if it's going to be my last at Roland Garros. 'I went through a tough process again with my foot, so I don't know what can happen in the near future.'" Overall, Djokovic leads Nadal 30-28 since their first career meeting at the 2006 French Open.

Nadal has a 19-8 edge on clay and has won seven of the pair's nine meetings in Paris. Djokovic, however, came out on top in the semi-finals at Roland Garros in 2021 on his way to a second title.

Night fears

That defeat took a physical toll on Nadal who then skipped Wimbledon, the Olympics and the US Open. With Djokovic departed from Melbourne on the eve of the Australian Open, Nadal seized the opportunity to claim a record-setting 21st Grand Slam title, breaking a tie with Djokovic and Roger Federer. Both men are playing in the quarter-finals at Roland Garros for the 16th time. Djokovic has reached the last-eight with ease. He has won 22 sets in a row, a run stretching back to his Italian Open triumph in Rome.

"I'm glad that I didn't spend too much time on the court up to the quarter-finals, knowing that playing Nadal in Roland Garros is always a physical battle. It's a huge challenge and probably the biggest one that you can have here," said Djokovic. Adding an extra twist to the clash was a battle of wills over scheduling which Nadal lost Monday when organizers selected the clash for the night session under the Court Philippe Chatrier lights.

"I don't like to play on clay during the night, because the humidity is higher, the ball is slower, and there can be very heavy conditions especially when it's cold," said Nadal. Djokovic had hinted he would prefer to face Nadal as late as possible. "All I will say is Rafa and I would make different requests," he said. Carlos Alcaraz, who faces Alexander Zverev also on Tuesday, said it would have been "unfair" if he was ordered to play after 9pm for the third time. Nadal and Djokovic have played one match each after dark. —AFP

Forest promoted to Premier League for first time in 23 years

LONDON: Nottingham Forest clinched promotion to the Premier League for the first time in 23 years with a 1-0 win against Huddersfield in the Championship play-off final on Sunday. Levi Colwill's own goal late in the first half at Wembley was enough for Steve Cooper's side to hit the jackpot in the most lucrative single match in world football. Promotion to the top-flight is estimated to be worth at least £170 million (\$214 million) in increased revenue.

Forest will gratefully accept the huge financial windfall, but it was the relief at ending their long exile from English football's elite that spurred the frenzied scenes of celebration among their thousands of red and white-clad fans. For the first time in the 21st century, Forest can look forward to welcoming the Premier League's elite to their City Ground stadium on the banks of the River Trent. The promotion was a personal triumph for Cooper, who has revitalised Forest since replacing the sacked Chris Hughton in September.

Forest were bottom of the table after taking one point from their first seven games, but Cooper had the midas touch as he erased the bitter taste of his defeat with Swansea in last year's Championship play-off final against Brentford. "I'm really pleased for the players and the supporters. Everybody connected with the football club deserves this today and we're now really looking forward to a positive future," Cooper said. "It's relief and pride. This isn't about me but it's changed my life, potentially anyway. 'We've brought Nottingham to Wembley today, we've taken over the place and here we are in the Premier League.'"

Cooper repaired the wounds of Forest's worst start to a season for 108 years and ensured they remained focus after losing a shot at automatic promotion in their penultimate game of the season against top-two rivals Bournemouth. Fourth placed Forest beat Sheffield United on penalties in the play-off semi-final and held their nerve again to earn the ultimate prize against Huddersfield. Having knocked Arsenal and Leicester out of this season's FA Cup before losing narrowly to Liverpool, Forest's sleeping giants have awoken from their slumber at last.



LONDON: Nottingham Forest's English striker Lewis Grabban lifts the Championship Playoff trophy after Nottingham Forest's victory at the end of the English Championship play-off final football match between Huddersfield Town and Nottingham Forest on May 29, 2022. —AFP

Back in the big time

Forest's golden period came under legendary boss Brian Clough, who led them to the English title in 1978 and won the European Cup in 1979 and 1980. Clough's retirement in 1993 triggered a steep decline in Forest's fortunes, with their wilderness years featuring a three-season spell in the third tier. Forest had been regular visitors to Wembley during Clough's heyday but this was their first appearance at the national stadium since 1992. No wonder the Forest supporters in the 80,000 crowd were in fine voice from the moment Ryan Yates headed James Garner's free-kick wastefully wide from six yards. Forest were the better side in a frantic encounter, but there was more perspiration than inspiration for long periods as passes went astray from both teams. Driven forward by on-loan Manchester United midfielder Garner, Forest broke the deadlock in the 43rd minute.

Garner whipped a dangerous inswinging cross into the Huddersfield area and Colwill inadvertently deflected it into his own net as the on-loan Chelsea defender tried to get to the ball before Yates. Rocked by that blow, Huddersfield finally raised their tempo after half-time and Jonathan Hogg should have done better with a header that failed to hit the target from a corner. The decisive moment came in the 73rd minute when Huddersfield were left fuming after being denied a strong penalty claim. Harry Toffolo went down under a challenge from Jack Colback but referee Jon Moss booked the Huddersfield wing-back for diving and VAR refused to overturn the decision. —AFP