

Djokovic pushes ahead with Adelaide title

Sabalenka sends Australian Open warning with Adelaide triumph



ADELAIDE: Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic celebrates after winning the final of the ATP Adelaide International tournament against Sebastian Korda of the US on Jan 8, 2023. — AFP

ADELAIDE: Top seed Novak Djokovic saved a match point Sunday before defeating Sebastian Korda to win the Adelaide International and reinforce his status as a heavy title favorite for the Australian Open. The 21-time Grand Slam winner needed more than three hours to stamp his authority on his unseeded American opponent, son of former world number two Petr Korda, 6-7 (8/10), 7-6 (7/3), 6-4. In doing so, Djokovic extended his unbeaten streak in Australia to 34 straight matches.

The winner of 92 career titles now heads to the Australian Open in about a week with momentum in his bid to secure the Grand Slam for a 10th time, helped by the absence at Melbourne Park of injured world number one Carlos Alcaraz. Djokovic, the 2007 champion at Adelaide in the early days of his career, called the pre-Open tune-up week "very special for me", thrilled by overwhelming fan enthusiasm.

"It's been an amazing week. To be standing here is a gift definitely," said the Serbian world number five, who missed last year's Australian Open after being deported over his vaccination status. "I gave it my all today and throughout the week in order to be able to get my hands on this trophy. The support I have been getting in the last 10 days was something that I don't think I've experienced too many times in my life," he added, with packed pro-Djokovic crowds whenever he played. It definitely felt like playing at home."

Djokovic nullified Korda's match point while serving at 5-6, 30/40 in the second set, coming

good on an overhead to make the save before the set moved into another tiebreaker which the Serb won. Korda, 22, was playing his fifth career final and said the experience boded well for the rest of the season. "It was a great start to the year, I wish I could have gotten it done today, but I know there's a long journey to go and a lot of positives from this week," he said. "I

think we're (he and his team) are going to have a great year together."

Djokovic, who showed no sign of the leg problem which bothered him on Saturday during his defeat of Daniil Medvedev, agreed, paying tribute to the fast-emerging American. "Amazing effort today Seb. I'd probably say you were closer to victory today than I was. It was decided in one or two shots, one or two points," he said. "Tough luck today but the future is bright for you."

Ready for 'big fight'

Meanwhile, Aryna Sabalenka said she was ready for a "big fight" at the Australian Open after firing a warning shot Sunday by winning her first title since 2021 at the Adelaide International. The world number five ended a slump of three consecutive defeats in WTA finals with a 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) victory against rising Czech teenager Linda Noskova in torrid 36 Celsius (96.8 Fahrenheit) conditions.

The Belarusian double-faulted on the first of three match points but sent over a serve winner on the second to wrap up the afternoon.

"I'm super happy with another title, it was a great week," the winner said. "I enjoyed every moment here in Adelaide, I'm happy with my performance. My serve helped me a lot, today especially. I was able to put her under pressure on her serve. I think that's why I won today."

The second seed, a holder of 10 titles, added one more to her career total as she put her veteran's experience to good use, ending the week without the loss of a set. She last lifted a trophy at the Madrid Masters in May, 2021 and is optimistic about her Australian Open chances after her week in South Australia. "I just feel that I'm ready to show my best. I'm ready for a big fight," she said.

World number 102 Noskova, the 2021 Roland Garros junior champion, will rise towards the top 50 with her run to her maiden final, upsetting world number two Ons Jabeur and veteran Victoria Azarenka along the way. At 18, she was the youngest finalist at a WTA 500 event since Caroline Wozniacki at New Haven 2007. "It was obviously a very tough match today. Aryna played just amazing," Noskova said. "I didn't have a lot of chances. I did have some break points, but she always served her way out of it. That was really tough to beat."

The teenager added: "When I trust myself and my game, I can actually beat some of the best players; that's really a great feeling. But I'm obviously going to have to develop my game. There are a lot of blind spots. There's always things to work on." — AFP



ADELAIDE: Belarusian tennis player Aryna Sabalenka holds the trophy after winning her final match against Czech Linda Noskova at the WTA Adelaide International tournament on Jan 8, 2023. — AFP

Loeb takes Dakar Rally stage; Sainz caught speeding

RIYADH: Sebastien Loeb grabbed victory Sunday in the eighth stage of the Dakar Rally after Carlos Sainz was hit with a five-minute penalty. The victory lifted Loeb to fourth overall but he remains almost two hours behind rally leader Nasser Al-Attiyah. The 48-year-old Frenchman won the stage by 2 minutes and 11 seconds in his Prodrive from Qatari Attiyah after 822 km of racing through valleys and sand between Al-Duwadimi and Riyadh.

Loeb has had a wildly up-and-down race in his Prodrive. After bad days on Monday and Tuesday he won on Wednesday but rolled his car on Thursday and on Saturday lost more than 16 minutes. "It was a good stage, a clean stage this time, for us," said Loeb at the finish on Sunday. "Just one puncture, we had to change one wheel, but the rest was okay. We tried to make it a big one."

Sainz has also had shifting fortunes in the sands. On Sunday he was caught driving 40 km over the limit in his Audi in a 30kph section. The penalty dropped him to third for the day at 3min 31sec. The Spaniard is 17th overall. Sainz said he was happy with his drive after a 'disappointing' first week. "We had a good stage, a clean stage. Finally, we got to enjoy ourselves a little



RIYADH: Brazilian driver Lucas Moraes and German co-driver Timo Gottschalk and Chinese driver Zhang Guoyu and French co-driver Jean Pierre Garcin compete during Stage 8 of the Dakar 2023 between Al Duwadimi and Riyadh on Jan 8, 2023. — AFP

bit and get a clear run." The Spaniard complained that because of his poor results he has been starting way down the field. "I liked it much better before in the Dakar, when a priority driver got a problem, you were immediately put in the top 15," he said. But on Sunday, despite "starting so far behind, we had no dust, thanks to the rain."

Before the penalty was announced Attiyah said he was happy with third. "Finishing third is okay," he said. "We have to try and be in the top 3 every day to earn as many points as we can for the championship." Attiyah gained time on his closest pursuer, Henk Lategan, who was fourth in a Toyota at 4min 53sec. — AFP

Kuwait must benefit from participation in Gulf Cup: Coaches

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti coaches Mohammad Al-Mashaan and Malik Al-Qallaf stressed Sunday the necessity of benefiting from the participation of the Kuwaiti national team in the Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 25). In statements to KUNA, the two coaches said that most of the teams participating in the championship adopted a clear plan by involving new players to develop them, raise their readiness and benefit from technical returns in preparing strong teams on the continental level.

Mashaan noted that the Kuwaiti team's performance in the first match of the competition was good, despite some tactical blunders, stressing that Kuwaiti players possess sufficient talent and high technical standards. He also said the technical level of the teams in the first round was average, but at the same time achieved the technical goals desired by the coaches.

Qallaf pointed out the Kuwaiti team did not deserve to lose in its first match, but some individual mistakes committed by some players affected the entire performance. Qallaf praised the Saudi and Bahraini teams, considering them the most convincing in the first round of the tournament, due to their characteristic technical and administrative stability, which enhance their chances of reaching far in the tournament. — KUNA



Mohammad Al-Mashaan



Malik Al-Qallaf