

Tsitsipas powers into semis

Impressive Greek to face Khachanov • Azarenka sets up Rybakina semifinal



MELBOURNE: Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates victory against Czech Republic's Jiri Lehecka on day nine of the Australian Open on Jan 24, 2023. — AFP

MELBOURNE: Stefanos Tsitsipas closed in on a first Grand Slam title by reaching the Australian Open semi-finals on Tuesday in impressive fashion, as Victoria Azarenka also powered into the last four. Tsitsipas was a convincing 6-3, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4 winner over unseeded Jiri Lehecka of the Czech Republic and faces Karen Khachanov next.

The 24-year-old Tsitsipas is the highest remaining seed left at three and with Melbourne's large Greek community roaring him on, his title charge is gathering pace. "I'm feeling great with my tennis. I don't think I felt so good in a long time," said Tsitsipas, after making the Australian Open semi-finals for a fourth time. "I'm a different player, playing different. My mentality is different."

Tsitsipas, who will become world number one should he win the title, was pretty much in control throughout against the 71st-ranked Lehecka. But he did lose his cool at one point in the third set, smacking the ball into the wall after losing a point as a ball

boy went to collect it nearby. "What I did, definitely I'm not happy about that. I shouldn't have done it," Tsitsipas said about the incident.

The other quarterfinal at Rod Laver Arena between Russia's Khachanov and Sebastian Korda had been warming up nicely until the American hurt his wrist. The 18th seed went through when Korda retired in the third set, down 7-6 (7/5), 6-3, 3-0. The 22-year-old Korda, who had been attempting to emulate his father Petr's Australian Open victory in 1998, said afterwards that he could barely hold the racquet.

He said he first felt the injury while playing the Adelaide International this month, where he made the final and forced a championship point before being beaten by Novak Djokovic. But it had not bothered him in the opening four rounds at Melbourne Park until he hit a return in the second set. "Volleying was almost impossible for me, so it was a little tough," he said. For Khachanov it is a

second consecutive Grand Slam semifinal, having reached the last four at the 2022 US Open.

Nine-time Melbourne champion Djokovic is still on the scene, with a quarterfinal against Russian fifth seed Andrey Rublev on Wednesday. The other quarterfinal is an all-American clash between Ben Shelton and Tommy Paul.

'It's my weapon'

Azarenka is back in the last four in Melbourne for the first time since she won the tournament in 2013 and will face big-serving Elena Rybakina. The Belarusian Azarenka, who also triumphed in 2012, secured an impressive straight-sets victory over Jessica Pegula. Third seed Pegula was hotly tipped to win the title but the American simply had no answers to Azarenka's pounding forehand groundstrokes.

The 33-year-old Azarenka rolled back the years in a surprisingly one-sided quarterfinal to triumph

6-4, 6-1. "Well, it hurts to beat her because I always want her to do well," the 24th seed said of Pegula, a close friend and practice partner. Asked how her young son Leo would receive his mum's latest achievement, Azarenka said: "He's more worried about his football and when we're going to play again. "He definitely wants his mum to be home."

Leo will have to wait at least a few more days because Azarenka faces Moscow-born Kazakh Rybakina on Thursday for a place in the final. Rybakina blasted her way into the semi-finals with a ruthless 6-2, 6-4 win over Jelena Ostapenko. The 23-year-old Rybakina sent down 11 aces to blow former French Open champion Ostapenko off court in 79 minutes. The 22nd seed has blasted 35 aces so far, more than any other woman at the tournament. Ominously, she said her serve is better now than when she won Wimbledon last year. "I gained even more power. It's my weapon on the court and of course we are trying to work on it," she said. — AFP

Hamilton opens up about racial abuse at school

LONDON: Lewis Hamilton has spoken about how he had bananas thrown at him and was repeatedly called the N-word during a "traumatizing" school career. The seven-time Formula One world champion, who grew up in a town near London, detailed the racial abuse in the On Purpose podcast, released on Monday. The 38-year-old, who is preparing for his 17th season in F1, said: "For me, school was the most traumatizing and most difficult part of my life."

"I was already being bullied at the age of six. At that particular school I was one of three kids of color and just bigger, stronger, bullying kids were throwing me around a lot of the time. "And the constant jabs, the things that are either thrown at you, like bananas, or people that would use the N-word just so relaxed. People calling you half-caste and not knowing where you fit in. That for me was difficult."

"In my (secondary) school there were six or seven black kids out of 1,200 kids and three of us were put outside the headmasters' office all the time." The

British driver said he felt the system was against him, adding that he suppressed "a lot of things". "I didn't feel I could go home and tell my parents that these kids kept calling me the N-word, or I got bullied or beaten up at school today," he said. "I didn't want my dad to think I was not strong."

Hamilton remains F1's only black driver. He has established Mission 44, which aims to enhance the lives of people from under-represented groups, and Ignite, a joint enterprise with his Mercedes team to improve diversity in motor racing. The British driver, who finished sixth in the 2022 standings, is entering the final year of his huge deal with Mercedes but it is anticipated that he will sign a new multi-year contract.

Looking ahead to life after F1, Hamilton added in the podcast, which was recorded in November: "It is going to be really, really hard when I stop racing. I have been doing it for 30 years. When you stop, what is going to match that? "Nothing is going to match being in a stadium, being at a race, being at the pinnacle of the sport and being at the front of the grid or coming through the grid and that emotion that I get with that."

"When I do stop there will be a big hole so I am trying to focus and find things that can replace that and be just as rewarding." Hamilton will unveil his new Mercedes at the team's launch at Silverstone on February 15 ahead of the first round of the new season in Bahrain on March 5. — AFP

Lampard sacked as manager of troubled Everton

LONDON: Frank Lampard was sacked as Everton manager on Monday after less than a year in charge at the struggling Premier League club. Lampard was hired by Everton to replace Rafael Benitez in January 2022, but the former Chelsea boss leaves with the team languishing 19th in the table. Everton fell to a damaging 2-0 defeat at relegation rivals West Ham on Saturday - a ninth loss in their past 12 Premier League matches which left them level on points with bottom club Southampton.

Everton owner Farhad Moshiri had previously offered public backing for Lampard. But the tame surrender at West Ham proved the final straw for Moshiri, who was at the game to watch Everton for the first time in 14 months. After several hours of reports that Lampard had been sacked, Everton finally confirmed the 44-year-old's departure on Monday evening.

"Everton Football Club can confirm that Frank Lampard has left his post as senior men's first team manager today," a club statement said. "Everyone at Everton would like to thank Frank and his coaching staff for their service during what has been a challenging 12 months. Frank and his team's commitment and dedication have been exemplary throughout their time at the club, but recent results and the current league position meant this difficult decision had to be taken. "We wish Frank and all his backroom team well for their future in the game. The club has started the process to secure a new manager and will provide updates on the appointment in due course."

Paul Tait and Leighton Baines will take training until a new manager is appointed, with Everton's next game against Premier League leaders Arsenal on Feb 4. Everton felt compelled to act over Lampard's future as they fight to avoid playing outside the top flight for the first time since 1954. Lampard arrived at Everton 12 months ago with the team languishing in 16th place and the former Chelsea and England midfielder initially looked a shrewd appointment, helping the Merseyside club avoid relegation.



Frank Lampard

Fan fury

Fueled by fervent backing from their fans at Goodison Park, the Toffees beat the drop by winning three of their last six league matches, including a dramatic 3-2 success against Crystal Palace that preserved their top-tier status. But Everton are now looking for their eighth permanent manager in less than seven years after Lampard failed to build on the momentum from that successful end to last term.

In a sign of the turmoil enveloping Everton, club directors were earlier this month ordered to stay away from Goodison Park due to perceived security risks. Lampard won only 12 of his 44 matches in charge of Everton in all competitions. Former Burnley boss Sean Dyche, ex-Leeds coach Marcelo Bielsa and West Ham's former Everton manager David Moyes are among the potential candidates to replace Lampard, according to bookmakers.

Al-Itihad boss Nuno Espirito Santo, formerly of Wolves, and ex-Everton striker Wayne Rooney, now in charge of MLS side DC United, have also been mooted as possible contenders. Hampered by the sale of Brazil forward Richarlison to Tottenham in the close season, Everton managed only three wins in 20 league games this term against a backdrop of mounting fan fury. There have been widespread protests against the board and Lampard at recent games. Supporters staged a sit-in demonstration after the recent loss to Southampton, with Everton defender Yerry Mina and team-mate Anthony Gordon confronted by fans when they left Goodison Park in their cars. — AFP



SAO PAULO: Second-placed Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton celebrates with fans after the Formula One Brazil Grand Prix in this Nov 13, 2022 file photo. — AFP