

Sabalenka, Rybakina in Australian Open final

24-year-old Sabalenka will be contesting her first Grand Slam final



MELBOURNE: Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka hits a return against Poland's Magda Linette during their women's singles semi-final match on day eleven of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne. — AFP

MELBOURNE: Aryna Sabalenka and Elena Rybakina will clash in what promises to be a bruising Australian Open final on Saturday after both won in straight sets in the last four. Big-serving Wimbledon champion Rybakina defeated two-time Melbourne winner Victoria Azarenka 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 at a blustery and chilly Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne on Thursday.

Powerful Belarusian Sabalenka then marched into the championship match with a 7-6 (7/1), 6-2 win over unseeded Magda Linette. The 24-year-old Sabalenka will be contesting her first Grand Slam final. The fifth seed has battled nerves in big matches previously and worked with a sports psychologist, but said after dismissing the Pole that both were a thing of the past.

"I realised that nobody (other) than me will help, you know?" she told reporters. "On the pre-season I spoke to my psychologist, saying: 'I feel like I have to deal with that by myself because every time hoping that someone will fix my problem, it's not fixing my problem.'"

"I just have to take this responsibility and I just have to deal with that." Whatever she is doing, it is working: Sabalenka has been in the form of her life since arriving in Australia. She won the Adelaide International warm-up tournament and has now extended her unbeaten streak to 10 matches, not

losing a single set in any of them.

And yet it was 30-year-old Linette, contesting her first major semi-final, who was out of the gate fastest, breaking to love in the opening game and holding for an early lead. Sabalenka was being made to work hard and showed all her new-found patience to get back on terms with a break of her own, to love, for 2-2 and the set went to a tiebreak.

Sabalenka timed her moment perfectly to up the aggression, and the decibel level, racing to 4-0 with a scream. An ace that barely clipped the line stretched it to 5-0 and she closed out comfortably after 51 minutes, having smacked 20 winners to just seven from Linette.

"I would say that I didn't start really well," admitted Sabalenka. "And then on the tiebreak I kind of found my rhythm and just started trusting myself, started going for the shots. It was great tennis from me in the tiebreak."

Sabalenka showed no sign of letting up in the second set, breaking Linette and with a scream of "Come on!" holding for a 3-1 advantage. A second break took her within sight of the finish line, which she raced across in 1hr 33min.

Missed opportunities

Reigning Wimbledon champion Rybakina, 23, said she hoped she had made her watching family proud

after another impressive display. The Moscow-born Kazakh prevailed in 1hr 41min against the 2012 and 2013 champion Azarenka of Belarus to account for a third major winner in as many matches. The 22nd seed Rybakina had already defeated reigning French and US Open champion Iga Swiatek in the fourth round and 2017 Roland Garros winner Jelena Ostapenko in the quarter-finals. Rybakina said her semi-final triumph was even more special because she had her sister and parents all watching at Melbourne Park for the first time.

"I'm super happy that we can spend evenings together and they can watch me live," said Rybakina, whose parents were not there to see her win Wimbledon last year. "For sure it's great for them. I didn't even talk with them yet. I'm sure they're happy. They don't see me often playing live, so I think this time, it's a big result already. "No matter how I play in the final, I think they're very proud and happy."

Azarenka, 33, was left to rue missed opportunities as her dream of a third Australian Open crown dissolved. "Right now especially it's kind of hard to digest," she said. "I'm proud of myself how I fought and I tried. "Tennis-wise I felt like I just wasn't there, especially in the important moments when I kept creating those opportunities for me. Just couldn't convert them." — AFP

Record EPL spending fuels transfer market recovery

LAUSANNE: Record spending by English Premier League clubs fuelled a recovery in the international transfer market in 2022 with a total outlay of some \$6.5 billion, according to a report published by FIFA on Thursday. The figure represents an increase on the last two years as football recovers from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic but is still below the levels of 2019 (\$7.35 billion), just before the health crisis, the sport's world governing body said in its Global Transfer Report.

The report only takes into account international transfers, in which over 20,000 were recorded and fewer than three thousand involved a fee. English clubs' spending "reached a record high of almost \$2.2 billion", the report said, with six of the 10 biggest international transfers involving moves to Premier League sides.

Among those moves were Liverpool's signing of Darwin Nunez from Benfica — for an initial 75 million euros (\$82m) plus 25 million in potential bonuses — and Luis Diaz from Porto as well as Manchester United's purchases of Casemiro and Antony from Real Madrid and Ajax respectively.

There was also Erling Haaland's switch from Borussia Dortmund to Manchester City and Newcastle United's signing of Alexander Isak from Real Sociedad. French clubs brought in the most money, although the total amount recouped of \$740.3 million was still down on 2019 figures of over \$900 million.

Meanwhile, the continuing growth of women's football was reflected by a 19 percent increase in the number of international transfers to a total of 1,555. Only a small number involved a fee but spending on international transfers rose to \$3.3 million, which FIFA said was 62 percent higher than the previous year.

Leading the biggest moves in the women's game was Keira Walsh's transfer from Manchester City to Barcelona, the fee for which was reported as being around 350,000 euros. "All of this reflects the impressive strides being taken as more and more female players continue to turn professional," said Emilio Garcia Silvero, FIFA's chief legal and compliance officer. — AFP

Rashford stars as Man Utd crush Forest

NOTTINGHAM: Marcus Rashford scored a dazzling solo goal as Manchester United beat Nottingham Forest 3-0 in the first leg of their League Cup semi-final on Wednesday to virtually book a place at Wembley next month.

The England man, enjoying a purple patch following the World Cup, netted his 18th goal of the season in the sixth minute to silence an expectant crowd at the City Ground.

New United loan signing Wout Weghorst scored his first goal for the club just before half-time, to put the visitors in total control, and Bruno Fernandes added gloss to the scoreline late on.

Erik ten Hag's men are hot favourites to reach Wembley as they seek to end their six-year trophy drought, with either Newcastle or Southampton lying in wait. "I'm happy with the performance and I think over 90 minutes we controlled it," Ten Hag told Sky Sports. But he highlighted a disallowed Forest goal in the first half, warning his side could not afford to let opponents back into the match when they were in charge.

The Dutchman was careful to avoid any hint of complacency ahead of the second leg at Old Trafford

on February 1. "We have to play one game and we have to do the same. We have to prepare, we have to make a good game plan and the players have to be focused," he said.

Former Ajax boss Ten Hag has revitalised United in his first season in charge but will be desperate to win silverware to appease the hungry fans. Brazil midfielder Casemiro was back in the United starting line-up after being suspended for Sunday's 3-2 Premier League defeat at leaders Arsenal, which left United fourth in the table.

Forest, with new boy Danilo in the starting line-up, came into the match full of confidence after just one defeat in their past seven Premier League matches had lifted them to 13th in the table.

But the visitors took control immediately and opened the scoring in style, Rashford picked up the ball in his own half and raced down the left, cutting into the box between Joe Worrall and Remo Freuler before beating Wayne Hennessey at his near post with a powerful left-footed shot. It was his 10th goal in 10 games since returning from Qatar last month.

Brazil winger Antony went close to making it 2-0 minutes later as United threatened to overwhelm the home team. Forest, who have won the League Cup four times in their history, thought they had equalised midway through the first half when Sam Surridge produced a fine finish after a rampaging run through the middle by Morgan Gibbs-White.

But the goal was ruled out by VAR for a tight off-side against Surridge. Gustavo Scarpa stung David de Gea's hands with an audacious volley as Forest increasingly came into the game, with Gibbs-White



NOTTINGHAM: Manchester United's English striker Marcus Rashford (C) fights for the ball with Nottingham Forest's Swiss midfielder Remo Marco Freuler during the English League Cup semi-final first-leg football match between Nottingham Forest and Manchester United. — AFP

and Brennan Johnson a threat.

But five-time winners United doubled their lead just before half-time, with Dutch forward Weghorst reacting smartly to fire home with the outside of his right foot after Hennessey had denied Antony. United were largely untroubled in the second half, coming agonisingly close to extending their lead when Christian Eriksen rattled the crossbar from the edge of the box in the 54th minute. — AFP