

Sports

Rybakina, Sabalenka march on as Pegula progresses in Miami

Andreescu suffers injury blow at Miami Open



MIAMI GARDENS: Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan plays a forehand to Elise Mertens of Belgium in their fourth round match at Hard Rock Stadium on March 27, 2023. — AFP

MIAMI GARDENS: Elena Rybakina extended her winning streak to 11 matches as she booked her place in the Miami Open quarter-finals with a 6-4, 6-3 win over Belgium's Elise Mertens on Monday while world number two Aryna Sabalenka powered past Barbora Krejčíková in straight sets. But there was agony for Canadian former US Open winner Bianca Andreescu, who had to be wheelchair-bound off court after suffering a left ankle injury and retiring against Ekaterina Alexandrova.

Rybakina is looking to complete the "Sunshine Double" after her triumph in Indian Wells, but she was far from euphoric after her victory. "Physically I'm not the freshest, but I'm happy that I'm managing and finding my way. To be in a quarter-final is great and hopefully I'm going to play better," she said. The Kazakh allowed Mertens to break in the sixth game of the first set but then two double faults from the Belgian allowed Rybakina to swiftly break back and then she struck again to take the opening set.

The Wimbledon champion broke early in the second set and never looked back and she will now face Italian Martina Trevisan in the quarters. Trevisan beat former French Open winner Jelena Ostapenko 6-3, 6-3. Sabalenka looked in ominous form as she blasted her way to victory over Krejčíková, the 2021 French Open winner, 6-3, 6-2.

Krejčíková had ended Sabalenka's 13-match win streak in February in Dubai but Sabalenka defeated the Czech two weeks ago at Indian Wells. This time Sabalenka took just 65 minutes to take care of business, going unbroken in the match and facing just one break point. The Belarusian lost just 10 points on her serve and will start as strong favourite on Wednesday against Romanian Sorana Cristea. Andreescu's return to form was cut brutally short when she suffered a left ankle injury in her match against Ekaterina Alexandrova.

While attempting a return, Andreescu injured the ankle, collapsing to the court as she yelled in pain. After receiving medical attention on court she was lifted into a wheelchair and taken off court in tears. The 22-year-old, who won the US Open in 2019 but then missed all of 2020 due to injury, returned to the circuit last April after a six-month break. In Miami she has looked very much back to her best with wins over Emma Raducanu, Maria Sakkari and Sofia Kenin. American Jessica Pegula looked comfortable and in command of her game as she beat Poland's Magda Linette 6-1, 7-5. World number three Pegula got off to a flying start - she struck seven winners in the opening nine minutes and won the first three games. With only 19 minutes on the clock she was 5-0 up. The second set was a different story though

with Linette grabbing a 5-2 lead. However, she twice let set point slip on her serve and Pegula went on to win the final five games to secure victory.

Weird match

Pegula had lamented her slow starts at Indian Wells but said her rapid-fire opening to matches in Miami had not been part of any strategy. "It wasn't something I was really thinking about. I think it just has been happening that way, which is nice," she said. "It was kind of a weird match. I had strings of games where I was playing really well, then (went) a little bit off. For the most part I was able string together good games, so that's always a good sign," she said. The American will face Anastasia Potapova after the Russian beat China's Zheng Qinwen 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) to continue her impressive run.

Romanian Cristea followed up her quarter-final at Indian Wells by securing another last eight appearance thanks to a 7-6 (7-3), 6-4, win over Czech Marketa Vondrousova. Revitalized by her Swedish coach Thomas Johansson, Cristea is enjoying a revival in fortunes at the age of 32 but knows she will need to produce one of the performances of her life as she is to get past Sabalenka. "I know it's going to be very tough but I've been winning a lot of matches this American swing and I have the confidence. I know what I can play." — AFP

Japanese boxing champion Murata hangs up gloves

TOKYO: Japan's former world and Olympic boxing champion Ryota Murata announced his retirement Tuesday, saying he had run out of challenges following his loss last year to Kazakh star Gennady Golovkin. Murata became Japan's first-ever Olympic middleweight gold medallist at the 2012 London Games before turning professional and capturing the WBA world title at the same weight five years later.

He was back in the global spotlight last April when he fought Golovkin in Saitama, north of Tokyo, putting in a strong performance until the man known as

"GGG" stopped him in the ninth round. Murata told reporters in Tokyo he had "always thought that the Golovkin fight would be the last one". "After that, I couldn't really find anything more that I wanted out of boxing," local media quoted the 37-year-old as saying. Murata retires with a professional record of 16-3, winning 13 by knock-out.

He became a big star in his home country after beating Brazil's Esquiva Falcão to win gold at the London Games, becoming Japan's first Olympic boxing champion since 1964. His humble, easy-going character won him friends in and out of the ring, and Golovkin presented him with his ring gown following their match as a mark of respect. Murata said he wants to become "a good role model" now that his career is over. "If you're an athlete, once your dream comes true, you lose your enthusiasm," he said. "Now I want to build a career and prove that life isn't just about competition." — AFP

Shadab leads Pakistan's consolation T20I win as Afghanistan take series

SHARJAH: Stand-in skipper Shadab Khan gave an all-round performance to guide Pakistan to a consolation 66-run win in the third and final Twenty20 international in Sharjah on Monday but Afghanistan take the series 2-1. Having lost the first two matches by six and seven wickets respectively, Pakistan's new-look side posted a strong 182-7 in 20 overs before restricting Afghanistan to 116 in 18.4 overs. Opener Saim Ayub led an improved batting show as Pakistan scored 182-7 after their below-par 92-9 and 130-6 in the first two matches.

Shadab then became the first Pakistani and seventh bowler overall to complete 100 T20I wickets in his 87th match, claiming 3-13. Afghanistan were never in hunt for the stiff target as fiery pacer Ihsanullah dismissed Rahmanullah Gurbaz (18) and Karim Janat (nought) before his sharp bouncer left Najibullah Zadran's chin bleeding. Najibullah was stable but could not resume his innings. Azmatullah Omarzai, concussion substitute for Najibullah, top-scored with 20-ball 21, hitting a six and two boundaries. Ihsanullah finished with 3-29. Mohammad Nabi was run out for 17. Rashid Khan made 16 and Usman Ghani scored 15 before becoming Shadab's 100th T20I wicket. New Zealand's pacer Tim Southee leads the T20I wicket takers with 134 followed by Bangladesh's Shakib Al Hasan (131), Afghanistan's Rashid (129), New Zealand's Ish Sodhi (114), Sri Lankan Lasith Malinga (107) and Bangladesh's Mustafizur Rahman (100).

Despite the series defeat, Pakistan can take heart from the fact that they checked their bench strength, having rested regular skipper Babar Azam, Mohammad Rizwan, Fakhar Zaman, Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf. Shadab said the motive for the series was achieved. "The main motive of this series was to give the youngsters a chance, hopefully, they will get confidence from these matches and it will help them in the long run," said Shadab. Series win, Rashid said, was memorable. "It's special to be part of this team, it was a great effort from everyone. We won the series, but we have some areas to improve on," said Rashid. "Any series after this is a good preparation for us before the World Cup," said Rashid of the 50-over World Cup in India later this year. — AFP



Kuwait Rhythmic Gymnastics team shines in Georgia

By Abdellatif Shara

KUWAIT: Kuwait Girls Rhythmic Gymnastics team won 3 gold, 2 silver and 1 bronze medals at the Georgia International Championship which was concluded Monday in the capital Tbilisi. Gymnast Nabila Al-Kharafi (10 years) won two gold medals in the general individual and ball performance and the silver medal in the free style.

Sarah Al-Bannai (11 years) won the mace gold, the ring silver and the general individual performance bronze while Raya Al-Qassar was not able to win despite her outstanding performance in the tournament where 300 players from Georgia, Kazakhstan, Iraq, Turkmenistan, UAE, Egypt, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia participated. Kuwait national team technical director Mohammad Abdelrasoul lauded the new achievement of Kuwait girls. He said the Gymnastics federation will continue with its plan following the successes and the major improvement of the players.



TOKYO: Japan's former world and Olympic boxing champion Ryota Murata holds a press conference to announce his retirement in Tokyo on March 28, 2023. — AFP

Tsitsipas wins after long wait in Miami

MIAMI: World number three Stefanos Tsitsipas finally got his Miami Open campaign under way on Monday with a 6-3, 4-6, 6-4 win over Cristian Garin while Argentine Francisco Cerundolo upset fifth-seeded Felix Auger-Aliassime. There were no shortage of upsets at Hard Rock Stadium with 12th seeded American Francis Tiafoe beaten by 59th ranked Italian Lorenzo Sonego in straight sets.

France's Adrian Mannarino beat seventh-seeded Pole Hubert Hurkacz and American qualifier Christopher Eubanks defeated Gregoire Barrere in straight sets. Tsitsipas arrived in Miami a week ago, had a first round bye and then had a walkover win in the second round when Richard Gasquet pulled out with injury. "It has almost felt like a vacation this past week, staying in Miami. I glad I got started. It was a difficult match against an opponent who has played good tennis against good opponents in the past," said the Greek.

Tsitsipas has not be on court much in recent weeks. He withdrew from Acapulco due to a shoulder injury and was beaten in his opening match at Indian Wells this month. The rest has, however, helped Tsitsipas to recover a little from his injury and although he was not at his sharpest, he did enough to book his place in the fourth round against Karen Khachanov.

Tsitsipas broke at 4-4 in the third set to make sure of his progress against the Chilean, who enjoyed plenty of support from the South Florida crowd. Khachanov defeated Czech Jiri Lehecka 6-2, 6-4 to reach the Miami last 16 for the first time. Cerundolo was knocked out of Indian Wells in straight sets by Canadian Auger-Aliassime two weeks ago, but it was a very different game on the faster courts in

South Florida. The 25th-seeded Argentine was on top from the outset, taking the first set 6-2 and he kept his nerve to triumph 7-5 in the second.

Miami is a happy hunting ground for Cerundolo, who made a surprise run to the semi-finals last year, and he relished the vocal support from his fans in the crowd. "That was another important win for me. I think I played really good from beginning to end," he said. "It is super nice to play here, a lot of Argentinians, a lot of people, so I really enjoyed it. Last year was amazing, so I'm really excited to be in the round of 16 again and to try to keep winning," he added.

Exciting American Tiafoe was tipped by many observers to go deep in the tournament but he fell 6-3, 6-4 to Sonego in a game disrupted by a second set rain delay of over an hour. Mannarino, playing inventive tennis, beat Hurkacz 7-6 (7/5) 7-6 (7/0) but will face a tricky test against the 26-year-old Eubanks who will break into the top 100 for the first time in his career thanks to his victory over 65th ranked Barrere, who had beaten Britain's Cam Norrie in the previous round.

Confident Halys

Eubanks trailed 6-2 in a second-set tie-break before a rain delay of more than an hour and he won seven of the next eight points for an emotional 6-3, 7-6 (9/7) victory. French qualifier Quentin Halys hit 15 aces as he beat American Mackenzie McDonald 7-6 (7/2), 6-3 to set up a fourth round clash with world number five Daniil Medvedev.

Halys had never won a match at ATP 1000 level prior to this tournament but has beaten Spain's Pedro Martinez and Australian Alex de Minaur before taking out McDonald. "I think I'm just the same player, I am just more confident, I know exactly what I have to do on court and I am very confident in my serve," Halys told AFP.

The 26-year-old said he has sharpened his mental approach to the game, handling better the dis-

appointment of missing out on break opportunities against McDonald in the second set. "I was still very focused, very positive after those games. Maybe in the past I was negative with myself and I am more positive now, maybe that is the key," said Halys who is ranked 79th in the world. — AFP



MIAMI GARDENS: Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece serves to Cristian Garin of Chile during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium on March 27, 2023. — AFP

Women's Premier League hailed as 'game-changing'

NEW DELHI: Indian cricket administrators and pundits on Monday hailed the Women's Premier League as a huge success after the inaugural tournament ended in fireworks with the Mumbai Indians winning the trophy in front of a huge crowd. Franchise and media rights for the women's version of the Indian Premier League sold for around \$700 million, making it the second-most lucrative domestic women's sports competition after US professional basketball.

Mumbai beat the Delhi Capitals by seven wickets in a thrilling final on Sunday to conclude the three-week Twenty20 extravaganza of the newest addition to women's cricket. England's Nat Sciver-Brunt hit the winning runs to trigger wild celebrations at Mumbai's Brabourne Stadium, which was nearly full to its capacity of 20,000.

"It was like a festival for women's cricket which the entire world was celebrating. The atmosphere at the stadium was at par if not better than any big tournament final," IPL chairman Arun Dharam told AFP. "The way the tournament was conducted, the response to the matches, it went off as one of the best women's cricket tournaments, even if you compare with the recently held World Cup. "As far as TV ratings are concerned, as far as competitive cricket is concerned, it was a great tournament." West Indies all-rounder Hayley Matthews was named player of the series for her 16 wickets and 271 runs. — AFP