

Djokovic, Federer, Serena remain favorites to win opening Grand Slam



Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer loom over Melbourne Park for the year's opening Grand Slam as favorites for the Australian Open as questions remain as to whether one of Generation Next could finally end their stranglehold.

The Serbian world number one and his Swiss opponent have won eight of the nine titles on Rod Laver Arena since 2010 and 11 of the last 13 on the bright blue courts in central Melbourne, Reuters reported.

Both have six titles each, and are seeking to break a three-way tie for the most victories with Australia's Roy Emerson.

While Federer has won the tournament for the last two years, Djokovic's history in Australia and rediscovery of his form last year means the world number one will be the man to beat.

The 31-year-old went into a bewildering slump in mid-2016 that only ended when he won Wimbledon last year before he went on to claim his third US Open crown and move to 14 Grand Slam titles, three behind Rafa Nadal.

The Spanish world number two, however, is battling another leg injury that forced him out of the Brisbane International last week and it is apparent that hard courts are

putting undue stress on the 32-year-old's body.

He retired in the quarterfinals against Marin Cilic last year in Melbourne and suffered yet another knee injury that forced him out of the US Open semifinals before he had ankle surgery in November.

The 20-times Grand Slam winner's victories over Greece's world number 15 Stefanos Tsitsipas and world number four Alexander Zverev prompted the German to playfully quip that he was tired of Federer winning everything.

"I mean, you're 30 whatever. Why? Just why?" Zverev asked jokingly of Federer at the Hopman Cup trophy presentation.

The 21-year-old Zverev appears the most likely of the younger generation hoping to end the world's top three's domination of Grand Slams, having beaten Federer and Djokovic at the ATP Tour Finals in London last November.

While others in 'Generation Next' like Austria's Dominic Thiem and the 22-year-old Russians Karen Khachanov and Daniil Medvedev could cause upsets, it is debatable whether they can win seven matches

over 14 days.

Two of the older generation who have shown they do have that ability — Britain's Andy Murray and Switzerland's Stan Wawrinka — could be dangerous floaters in the draw.

Murray, a five-time finalist at Melbourne Park, spent most of last year recuperating from hip surgery and looked rusty last week in Brisbane but declared himself pain free.

Wawrinka, the 2014 champion, is also coming back from knee surgery and a back injury in the second half of 2018, but typically flies under the radar through Grand Slams.

Williams chasing 24

The women's draw looks more open even with Serena Williams, the most dominant force in the sport, back and chasing a 24th Grand Slam singles title to tie Margaret Court's all-time record.

The American was eight weeks pregnant when she won her 23rd title at Melbourne Park in 2017 and returned to action last year where she reached finals at Wimbledon and the US Open.

Williams enters the year's first Grand Slam ranked 16th but she still remains the favorite in Melbourne even if she lost to Naomi

Osaka in the Flushing Meadows final.

World number one Simona Halep, with a massive burden off her shoulders, will hope to go one better this year having lost the 2018 final to Caroline Wozniacki.

The Romanian broke her major duck at the French Open in June last year and finished the season at number one for the second consecutive year.

A second Australian Open title will be a perfect birthday gift for world number two Angelique Kerber, who turns 31 in the first week of the tournament.

Kerber beat Williams in the Wimbledon final to become the first German woman to win the grass court title since Steffi Graf in 1996.

She has looked sharp at the Hopman Cup and maintained her 100 percent singles record even though Germany lost to Federer's Switzerland in the final.

Also in the mix is the popular Osaka, who stunned Williams in New York.

The 21-year-old Japanese, however, had an inconsistent buildup to the year's first Grand Slam.

Osaka suffered a straight set loss to Lesia Tsurenko in the semifinal of the Brisbane International and withdrawal from the Sydney International in frustration.

Champion choice

Jarrell Miller's promoter said world boxing champion Anthony Joshua has the "ball in his court" as the American heavyweight remains interested in a New York fight in 2019.

Osako double triggers Japan comeback against Turkmenistan

Yuya Osako netted a quick-fire double as former champion Japan survived a scare to beat Turkmenistan 3-2 in their AFC Asian Cup opener on Wednesday.

The Blue Samurai reached the last 16 at last year's World Cup but had to fight back from a goal down at halftime in an absorbing Group F clash in Abu Dhabi, AFP reported.

Turkmenistan captain Arslan Amanov put the plucky underdog ahead after 26 minutes, unleashing a ferocious long-range drive that arched into the top corner.

But Osako produced a smart turn and finish inside the box to equalize for Japan 10 minutes into the second half following sustained pressure from the four-time Asian champion.

their Asian Cup flop four years ago when they lost on penalties to the UAE in the quarterfinals.

But with a little luck Turkmenistan could easily have inflicted a major shock.

The Emeralds should arguably have been three up by halftime after Mekan Saparov headed over from pointblank range and an Atayev rocket forced Japan goalkeeper Shuichi Gonda into a brilliant reflex save.

"I was actually surprised how well we did in the first half," said Turkmenistan coach Yazygul Hojageldiyev.

"We lost our way a bit in the second half, but we're not out of it yet. We'll give everything in the next two games."

Japan, only kept out of the World Cup quarterfinals by a stunning Belgium come-



Yuya Osako (C) of Japan celebrates a goal against Turkmenistan during an AFC Asian Cup match at Al Nahyan Stadium, Abu Dhabi, the UAE, on January 9, 2019.

The Werder Bremen striker put Japan in front four minutes later, tapping into an empty net after Yuto Nagatomo's dinked pass over goalkeeper Mammet Orazumammedov.

Ritsu Doan added a deflected third after 70 minutes as Turkmenistan began to wilt.

But Ahmet Atayev swept home a penalty 11 minutes from time to ensure a nervous finish for Japan, which are now unbeaten in six matches since Hajime Moriyasu took charge after the World Cup.

The Japanese are seeking to make up for

back from two goals down, has now lost just one of its last 29 games at the Asian Cup, excluding penalty shootouts.

But it will need to improve if Japan is to threaten the favorite Iran — 5-0 winner over Yemen earlier this week — and a South Korea side soon to be boosted by the arrival of Tottenham forward Son Heung-min.

"The first match is always a bit special and we expected a battle," said Moriyasu.

"Obviously we're happy to get the three points but we have a lot of things to work on for the next game."

French defender Pavard to join Bayern in summer

Bayern Munich reached an agreement to sign the France defender

Benjamin Pavard, who will join the German champion on a five-year



Benjamin Pavard (L) GETTY IMAGES

deal from next season, according to the Bavarian club's sporting director, Hasan Salihamidzic.

The 22-year-old currently plays for its Bundesliga rival VfB Stuttgart and was involved in France's 2018 World Cup final victory over Croatia in Russia, a tournament where he also scored a stunning goal in the last-16 win over Argentina, the Guardian reported.

The fee is believed to be €35 million (£31.4m).

"I can announce that we managed to get the services of Benjamin Pavard from July 1, 2019," Salihamidzic said during a Bayern training camp in Qatar. "He signed a five-year contract."

Salihamidzic also confirmed

Bayern's interest in Chelsea teenage forward Callum Hudson-Odoi, as the German club looks to boost its frontline following the expected departure of veteran wingers Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery at the end of the season.

"He is a very interesting player whom we really want to sign," Salihamidzic added of the 18-year-old. "He has qualities that fit into our game. He can dribble well and has a drive toward goal. He has a lot of potential."

The season resumes next week after the annual winter break with Bayern, which has won the last six league titles, in second place, six points behind the leader, Borussia Dortmund.



Warriors' Klay Thompson (L) lays up a shot ahead of Knicks' Danyean Dotson during an NBA game AT Oracle Arena in Oakland, CA, the US, on January 8, 2019.

Klay Thompson scored 43 points with seven three-pointers, Stephen Curry had his first double-double of the season with 14 points and a season-best 14 assists, and the Golden State Warriors snapped a rare three-game home losing streak by beating the cold-shooting New York Knicks 122-95 on Tuesday night.

Kevin Durant added 24 points, six rebounds and six assists while Draymond Green had 11 rebounds and 10 of his team's 36 assists as the Warriors pulled away late in the first half to get back on a winning track at Oracle Arena, The Associated Press reported.

Thompson hit five of his first seven shots and had 12 points by the end of the first, finishing 18-of-29 from the floor — seven-for-16 from long range — and notching his second game with at least 40 points after going off for 52 at Chicago on October 29.

Mario Hezonja scored 19 points for the Knicks, who shot 39.8 percent (35-of-88). Enes Kanter added 12 points and 16 re-

bounds.

The Warriors ended the first half on a 13-0 run over the final 2:47 of the first half to turn a 49-48 deficit into a 61-49 lead at the break.

The skid at home matched the longest at Oracle Arena during Steve Kerr's five seasons as coach.

"I think all great teams have a really good record at home, just kind of the way it is, so we need to re-establish ourselves this week at Oracle," Kerr said.

Golden State won its 10th straight against New York and fifth in a row at home, and this marked the Knicks' final visit to Oracle Arena before the two-time defending champion Warriors move across the bay to new arena Chase Center starting next season.

Curry hit 10 three-pointers on the way to 42 points in Saturday's 127-123 win at Sacramento, moving him into fourth place on the all-time three-point list. He had three more Tuesday to reach 2,280, two shy of matching Jason Terry (2,282) for third all-time.

Police injured as Lazio's 119th anniversary celebrations turn violent

Eight police officers were injured after celebrations to mark Lazio's 119th anniversary in the center of Rome turned violent, police told Italian media on Wednesday.

The skirmishes took place at Piazza della Libertà in the center of the Italian capital where up to 2,500 Lazio fans gathered late Tuesday at the spot of the club's foundation, AFP reported.

The gathering had also been attended by the club's president Claudio Lotito who addressed the crowd but left before tensions mounted.

Shortly after midnight, an estimated 300 fans, with their faces covered, broke away from the main group and began throwing bottles and other objects at police, who responded with tear gas and water cannons.

Police said eight officers had injuries, mostly with cuts and bruising, one fan

was arrested and three others detained, all with links to the club's hardcore 'Ultra' fans.

All will receive DASPO Urbano exclusion orders, a 'Sports Event Access Ban'.

Tensions are running high in Italy after violent clashes before Inter Milan's league game against Napoli on December 26 in the San Siro, which was also overshadowed by racist chanting.

A 39-year-old Inter Milan fan was killed after being struck by a car.

There were also clashes in Rome before Lazio's Europa League game against German club Eintracht Frankfurt last month.

Lazio was founded at Piazza della Libertà on January 9, 1900 by a group of army officers.

City rival AS Roma was formed 27 years later following the merger of various capital clubs.



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