

# Seventh heaven beckons Federer, Djokovic

Question marks remain over World No. 2 Nadal's fitness



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
MELBOURNE

Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic will be gunning for a record seventh Australian Open crown from Monday, but Andy Murray will make his last appearance in Melbourne as the era of the 'Big Four' draws to a close.

Top seed Djokovic and third seed Federer face a stern challenge from the likes of Alexander Zverev, seeded four, who is still looking for a first Major to cement his place as torch-bearer for the next generation.

Murray dropped a pre-Grand Slam bombshell, breaking down during a press conference as he revealed chronic hip pain means he will retire after Wimbledon – if he can carry on that long.

And, question marks remain over the fitness of World No. 2 Rafael Nadal, who pulled out of his Brisbane warm-up but arrived in Melbourne professing he was "fully fit" and promising to unleash a remodelled serve.

It all means the era of the 'Big Four' is almost over after a season in which Federer – who opens his title defence against Denis Istomin on Monday – rolled back the



**Milestone park:** Defending champion Caroline Wozniacki returns to the Rod Laver Arena where she won her maiden Grand Slam. •MICHAEL DODGE/GETTY IMAGES

years on Rod Laver Arena to lift an emotional 20th Grand Slam.

By contrast, Djokovic endured a miserable early Melbourne exit in 2018, followed by elbow surgery and a string of disappointing results that saw him drop outside the top 20. But, since winning a fourth Wimbledon in July, the Serb rose inexorably back to No. 1, losing only three further matches – one of which was to Zverev at the

ATP Finals.

Djokovic won his third US Open in September to put him on 14 Grand Slams.

Second-ranked Nadal, 32, pulled out of Brisbane with a thigh strain although he returned for an exhibition in Sydney and insisted at the weekend his fitness woes were behind him.

Djokovic picked young guns Zverev of Germany, Borna Coric of Croatia, Karen Khachanov of Russia and Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas as key threats to the top three.

Home fans will look to new Sydney champion and 27th seed Alex de Minaur, who faces Portugal's Pedro Sousa on Monday, and the temperamental Nick Kyrgios.

**Serena keeps low profile**

Meanwhile, Serena Williams has adopted a low profile ahead of the Australian Open, but rival players admit the American's shadow looms large in Melbourne as

she eyes a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam crown.

Williams won her 23rd title and seventh at Melbourne Park while eight weeks pregnant two years ago, and now attempts to match Margaret Court's mark of 24 singles Majors on the Australian's home soil.

Defending champion and third seed Caroline Wozniacki of Denmark preferred to concentrate on her own prospects, dismissing concerns health problems were affecting her game.

She achieved a career milestone last year to claim her maiden Grand Slam at Melbourne Park, but also revealed she was suffering the debilitating auto-immune condition rheumatoid arthritis.

Wozniacki's vanquished opponent in last year's final, Simona Halep, arrives in Australia with the Number 1 ranking and her confidence overflowing after winning

the French Open.

Second-ranked Angelique Kerber has already indicated her priority for 2019 will be the French Open, the only Slam to elude the 30-year-old German in her career.

Naomi Osaka is the leading contender among the younger generation, warming up for Melbourne by making the semifinals of the Brisbane International.

## SHOWPIECE MATCHES

■ **Rod Laver Arena:** 30-Sharapova vs Dart; 2-Nadal vs Duckworth; 2-Kerber vs Herczeg; 3-Wozniacki vs Van Uytvanck; 3-Federer vs Istomin.

■ **Margaret Court Arena:** 14-Goerges vs Collins; 5-Stephens vs Townsend; 6-Cilic vs Tomic.

■ **Melbourne Arena:** 5-Anderson vs Mannarino; 22-Bautista Agut vs Murray; 8-Kvitova vs Rybakikova.

# Indian women set for New Zealand

Direct World Cup entry is primary target, says Mithali Raj

G. VISWANATH  
MUMBAI

After going through an upheaval following India's exit from the Twenty20 World Cup in the West Indies and some rancour coming to the fore between India's seniormost player Mithali Raj on one side and Harmanpreet Kaur, Smriti Mandhana and former coach Ramesh Powar on the other, the Indian women's team is all set to embark on a tour of New Zealand for the first time in 12 years.

India captain Mithali Raj, who is set to complete 200 ODIs during the tour, touched upon the need to earn a direct entry into the 2020-21 World Cup and also summed up the recent events that vitiated the atmosphere in the dressing room, at a press conference here on Sunday.

## Team profile

Asked whether the controversy had affected the profile of the team, she said: "It



**On a mission:** Mithali Raj and V.V. Raman will helm the Indian team's New Zealand visit after 12 years. • PRASHANT NAKWE

(the unpleasant incidents) definitely did affect women's cricket in a not so good way. But we are getting an opportunity to perform and let people talk about the team's performance that will only enhance the profile of the sport."

On whether she had thought of quitting and her future plans, Mithali said: "I did not think of quitting, be-

cause whatever happened, it happened off the field. I don't know where I will be two or three months from now. I don't know whether I will be part of the 2020-21 World Cup. My focus will be on the immediate series against New Zealand. I cannot predict or comment about my future. I have never planned throughout my career, it's always been with the flow."

In the last two years, Purnima Rau, Tushar Arothe and Powar have been the coaches. The fourth now is V.V. Raman.

"When a coach comes in, we as a team are very vocal and expressive as to what is required, what will benefit the team. The coach and the players have to be on the same page. "I have not trained under him (Raman), but I have met him a couple of times," she said. "He has played and coached teams at various levels; he has the experience and the expertise."

## Crucial stage: Raman

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
MUMBAI

V.V. Raman feels that events surrounding the performance of the team in the last 18 months made him apply for the head coach job.

"The team reached the final of the 50-over World Cup and the semifinals of the T20 World Cup. That's the reason I put my hat into the ring. There was an indication that team has great talent and are capable of going places.

"They have set a high standard in the last 18 months. It augurs well, and that's the reason everybody should be looking towards a much better showing than they did in the last 18 months.

Given the talent, they should be able to do it."

The former India left-hander added: "Having watched them play and all that has transpired over the last 18 months, this is a very crucial stage. From here they can sort of skyrocket or if things don't go well, can really go down South. I thought they require somebody with experience and I fancied myself."

"Every coaching assignment is a challenge and this is slightly different because it's a different segment. But the common denominator is cricket. In terms of practice and technique, there is nothing much different."

## The schedule

### ODIs

Jan. 24 (Napier)

Jan. 25 (Mount Maunganui)

Feb. 1 (Hamilton)

### T20Is

Feb. 6 (Wellington)

Feb. 8 (Auckland)

Feb. 10 (Hamilton)

## Vijay Shankar, Gill called up

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
MUMBAI

The BCCI's senior selection Committee have chosen Tamil Nadu all-rounder Vijay Shankar and Punjab batsman Shubman Gill as replacements for the suspended Hardik Pandya and K.L. Rahul.

Vijay Shankar will play in the ODI series in Australia, starting from the second match in Adelaide on January 15, while Gill will join Vijay Shankar for the five-match ODI and three-match T20I series in New Zealand.

## Rayudu reported

Ambati Rayudu, meanwhile, has been reported for a suspect bowling action during the first ODI in Sydney, the ICC said on Sunday. Rayudu bowled two overs in the game on Saturday, conceding 13 runs.

However, Rayudu can still bowl if the need arises.

# 'I always believed I had the skill-set'

Vijay Shankar looking forward to making contributions that help the side

## OZ CHALLENGE

S. DINAKAR  
CHENNAI

Vijay Shankar credits his comeback into the Indian limited-over squad to two factors.

Firstly, he has learnt to enjoy his cricket following the advice of his Chennai coach S. Balaji, than put pressure on himself. It was a clever mental switch.

## Dravid's role

Then, the confidence shown in him by India-A coach Rahul Dravid, who sent Vijay Shankar at No. 5 during stiff chases against New Zealand-A, instilled belief in him apart from giving the all-rounder responsibility.

Vijay Shankar responded with a match-winning 87 off 80 deliveries against New Zealand-A – the target was 309 – in the first one-dayer at Mount Maunganui.

Then he came up with a



Vijay Shankar. •FILE PHOTO

56-ball 59 as India, pursuing 300, sealed the one-day series at the same venue.

"By sending me in at No. 5, Dravid sir got me really motivated. He gave me the chance to express myself," Vijay Shankar told *The Hindu* on Sunday.

And, all along, Vijay Shan-

kar has sent down his seamers usefully. He operates around 130 kmph, keeps it in the right areas and does achieve some bounce with his height and high-arm action and seam movement.

Vijay Shankar is expected to reach Australia in time for the second ODI in Adelaide on Tuesday.

He said, "This is my first trip to Australia and I am excited. I missed an India-A tour of Australia some years ago because of an injury."

## Familiar with conditions

Vijay Shankar said, "I am familiar with the conditions in New Zealand. On the-A tour, we faced some very good fast bowlers in Doug Bracewell, Lockie Ferguson, James Neesham, and Hamish Bennett, all of them have played for New Zealand."

Vijay Shankar had performed capably in the First Class leg of the New Zealand-A tour too with innings

of 62 at Mount Maunganui and 71 Whangarei. And whenever given the ball, he bowled with control if not explosive speed.

The 27-year-old allrounder said, "I am fitter and mentally stronger now. I always believed I had the skill-set. I am looking forward to fitting into the Indian team and making contributions that help the side's cause."

In the shorter formats, Vijay Shankar has improved his ball-striking ability by practising against the robot-stick – a flexible rod that can hold and release [manually] the ball at great speeds – and employing range-hitting; a centre-wicket practice where distant parts of the boundary ropes are targeted and cleared.

Vijay Shankar is firmly focused but wants to "live the moment rather than being consumed by it" and seeks to "enjoy every bit of his cricket."

# On the cusp of history, Indians out to exact revenge against Bahrain

A win or a draw will see Constantine's men progress to the knockout stage of the continental showpiece for the first time

## ASIAN CUP

SHYAM VASUDEVAN  
SHARJAH

January 14, 2011 saw India slump to a 5-2 loss against Bahrain and exit the AFC Asian Cup after failing to register a single win. Indian football has come a long way since and eight years to the day, the side has a chance to erase the painful memories and re-write history when the two sides face-off in their final group stage match here.

The Blue Tigers have three points in their name after a 4-1 pummelling of Thailand in the opening game, which was followed by a deflating 2-0 loss to the United Arab

Emirates. Bahrain, however, has had a mediocre campaign and has managed to amass only one point from two games, after a 1-1 draw with UAE and a 1-0 loss to Thailand.

Monday night's clash at the Sharjah Football Stadium will be one of the most important games of coach Stephen Constantine's career. A win, or even a draw, will see India progress to the knockout stage of the continental showpiece for the first time, making it the team's biggest achievement on the global scale.

India has had a fairly impressive run at the tournament thus far and has played a more enterprising brand of

football as compared to its opponents.

The team has looked sharp up front and has managed to create plenty of goal-scoring chances, though its finishing needs a little improving. The defence has looked susceptible to aerial deliveries but on the whole, it has been pretty tight at the back.

"Bahrain is a good team, they're very well organised and have some quality players. We expect a tough game. I'm sure they're going to try and attack us, but we're prepared for that," said Constantine on the eve of the game.

Bahrain will head into the match with the sole aim of

claiming all three points if it is to remain in the competition. Constantine acknowledges that this will ensure a thrilling contest.

"The more you have to fight for, the more you have to lose and the harder you have to try. When someone is backed into a corner, he has nothing to lose. They have to win, a draw will do nothing for them," he said.

India's top-scorer Sunil Chhetri is the only player in the current side who had played on 2011 and incidentally, Chhetri had bagged a goal in the 2011 game against Bahrain.

"We haven't achieved anything substantial yet.



Sunil Chhetri. •REUTERS

What I want to achieve is to reach the top-10 in Asia and rub shoulders with the best. For that, we have to improve a lot. The first step starts with a result against Bahrain," he said.

# Man United's revival continues

## EURO LEAGUES

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LONDON

Tottenham Hotspur's Premier League title ambitions suffered a major blow as Marcus Rashford's goal gave Manchester United a 1-0 victory at Wembley on Sunday to maintain caretaker manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's perfect start.

Rashford beat Tottenham keeper Hugo Lloris from a tight angle in the 44th minute as rejuvenated United claimed a sixth win from six matches since former striker Solskjaer stepped in following the sacking of Jose Mourinho.

United's Spanish keeper David de Gea then produced a series of superb saves to deny Dele Alli, Harry Kane and Toby Alderweireld after the break as United hung on for a first away league win against Tottenham since 2012.

Solskjaer's side remained in sixth spot but is now level



**Impenetrable:** United's David de Gea brought off a string of saves to deny Tottenham. •AFP

on 41 points with Arsenal while Tottenham has 48 points in third place.

Maurizio Sarri warned his Chelsea stars to improve their mentality after William's sublime strike sealed a hard-fought 2-1 win over struggling Newcastle on Saturday.

Sarri's side took the lead through Pedro's early goal, but Ciaran Clark snatched a shock equaliser before half-time.

**The results: Premier League:** Everton 2 (Zouma 61, Calvert-Lewin 90+5) bt Bournemouth 0; Tottenham 0 lost to Manchester United 1 (Rashford 44).

**La Liga:** Atletico Madrid 1 (Griezmann 57-pen) bt Levante 0.

**Saturday: Premier League:** Chelsea 2 (Pedro 9, Willian 57) bt Newcastle 1 (Clark 40).

**La Liga:** Girona 1 (Stuani 12) drew with Alaves 1 (Borja 50); Villarreal 1 (Cabrera 76-og) lost to Getafe 2 (Jorge Molina 52, Rodriguez Diaz 89).

## Anand stays in joint lead

SPORTS BUREAU  
WIJK AAN ZEE

Viswanathan Anand drew with Russia's Vladimir Fedoseev in 34 moves to stay in the lead with Ian Nepomniachtchi at 1.5 points after two rounds of Tata Steel chess tournament here on Sunday.

## The results:

**Second round:** Viswanathan Anand (1.5) drew with Vladimir Fedoseev (Rus, 1); Ding Liren (Chn, 1) drew with Vidit Gujrathi (1); Magnus Carlsen (Nor, 1) drew with Ian Nepomniachtchi (Rus, 1.5); Shakhriyar Mamedyarov (Aze, 1) drew with Teimour Radjabov (Aze, 1); Vladimir Kramnik (Rus, 0.5) lost to Anish Giri (Ned, 1); Jan-Krzysztof Duda (Pol, 0.5) lost to Jorden van Foreest (Ned, 1).