

New year, old guard

World’s top two Nadal, Djokovic’s tight wins set up the ATP Cup final between Spain and Serbia

ASSOCIATED PRESS
SYDNEY, JANUARY 11

RAFAEL NADAL was coming off a really late night, and was determined to finish work before midnight on the eve of the inaugural ATP Cup final against Serbia. After more than 20 tight games against 20-year-old Alex de Minaur’s relentless attack, Nadal converted his first service break to clinch the second set and then it was all one-way in a 4-6, 7-5, 6-1 win as he secured Spain’s semifinal win against host Australia on Saturday night.

Top-ranked Nadal and his Spanish team will face No. 2-ranked Djokovic’s Serbian team on Sunday night for the first title in the new 24-team international tournament. Djokovic beat Daniil Medvedev 6-1, 5-7, 6-4 to secure Serbia’s win over Russia in the first of the semifinals. Nadal said it’s been a difficult few days for Spain. The Davis Cup champions played the group stage in Perth and had a transcontinental trip to Sydney for the playoffs. He didn’t want any repeats of the quarterfinals the previous night, when he lost to David Goffin – just his second loss in a singles match since a semifinal defeat to Roger Federer at Wimbledon – and then didn’t win the deciding doubles encounter against Belgium until after 1 a.m. in a match tiebreaker. So Nadal basically finished a quarterfinal and a semifinal on the same date. He didn’t get to bed until 5:30 a.m., and wasn’t happy about the scheduling.

“Yeah, has been a tough couple of days, especially for Team Spain ... with jet lag to make things even a little bit more difficult,” Nadal said. “But here we are. Has been important day for us. Roberto played an amazing match, and I had a great comeback.”

Roberto Bautista Agut had earlier beaten Nick Kyrgios 6-1, 6-4 to give Spain the lead, and Nadal’s win secured Spain’s victory before the doubles.

Nadal hadn’t lost back-to-back singles matches since 2016. De Minaur took the challenge to him, getting a service break to open and, after missing set points on Nadal’s serve in the 9th game, closing out the first set relatively quickly. “I wasn’t surprised. He’s young. He has a lot of energy. He plays with a lot of passion,” Nadal said of de Minaur. “And I was a little bit lower energy than usual. That’s why he was able to take advantage. And I think when the match was going on, I was able to play better and better, to find a little bit better the rhythm and the energy back to my body.”

Nadal led Spain to the Davis Cup title at Madrid last November and is aiming to make it back-to-back triumphs in international team events. To do that, he’ll need to end a drought on hardcourts against Djokovic that dates back to his U.S. Open win in 2013. Djokovic leads their career meetings 28-26, but has been dominant on the surface. Nadal’s last five wins in their series have been on clay. “This is not a singles competition. This is a team competition,” Nadal said, referring to the best-of-three match format.



Rafael Nadal beat Alex de Minaur 4-6, 7-5, 6-1 to secure Spain’s semifinal win against hosts Australia. AP

Nadal x Djokovic = Good news for Roger

RAFAEL NADAL versus Novak Djokovic, the most played rivalry in tennis gets a 55th match-up at the ATP Cup. It will be the third meeting on Australian soil, all have come in finals. The first such meeting, back in the final of the 2011 Australian Open produced the longest ever Grand Slam final, a five-setter that Djokovic won after five hours and 53 minutes.

It was a match that saw both players being unable to stand during the presentation ceremony, prompting organisers to go against tradition and call for chairs. As soon as Nadal beat Alex de Minaur to book a spot in the ATP Cup final against Djokovic’s Serbia, the memes started pouring in.

A split-screen image with a photo of Nadal and Djokovic, both with hands on knees, unable to stand straight after the tiring final from 2011, made rounds. The caption for that reads ‘Nadal and Djokovic one week before the Australian Open.’

Another photo is of a certain 20-time Grand Slam champion, beaming at the prospect of both his big rivals being tired ahead of the first major of the year, along



with the caption ‘Meanwhile, Federer...’

For all you know, that might just be the way Federer will be watching this match.

SOME LOVE FOR KYRGIOS

Australia has a love-hate relationship with the mercurial Nick Kyrgios. At the

ATP Cup, it’s been a different tone that he has adopted. He’s been relatively well-behaved, almost single-handedly led his country to a semi-final finish. Off court, he’s lent a hand in raising awareness for the deadly bushfires that have been threatening the country – pledging \$200 per ace he hits in the Australian summer (so far 70 aces = \$14,000), and even spoke against PM Scott Morrison’s delayed reaction towards the bushfires.

So when he did finally fold on court, in a 6-1, 6-4 loss to an in-form Roberto Bautista Agut, his performances and kind gestures did not go unnoticed.

“If you’re going to turn on Kyrgios again after one bad match, in which his opponent has played sublime tennis, you can p’s’s off,” tweeted one user.

“Nick Kyrgios is a 24-year-old, who is carrying the expectations of Australia on his shoulders. The internal pressure he’d put on himself would be crazy. Nerves got him tonight. Put yourself in his shoes before you bash him online for being a ‘flog’ or a ‘disgrace,’” posted another.

Madrid powerhouses meet in Super Cup final in Saudis

ASSOCIATED PRESS

JEDDAH, JANUARY 11

THE SPANISH capital’s two soccer powerhouses will face off on Sunday thousands of kilometers from Madrid in the final of the new-look Spanish Super Cup.

Real Madrid plays Atletico Madrid in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to decide the winner of the first edition of a revamped tournament.

The Spanish federation expanded the competition to four teams – instead of two – and moved it from the start of the season to its midpoint. The federation was not deterred by human rights activists and European football’s governing body who criticized it for taking the mini-competition to Saudi Arabia on a three-year deal reportedly worth 120 million euros (\$134 million).

UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin had recommended for European soccer teams not to play in countries “where the basic rights of women are not respected.”

Spanish federation president Luis Rubiales has tried to deflect the criticism by highlighting that opening the games to women spectators was part of the deal to play in the country.

Coach Ernesto Valverde, whose Barcelona team was beaten by Atletico 3-2 in Thursday’s semifinal, has publicly said that the games are about making more money.

Amnesty International organized a small peaceful protest in front of the Saudi Arabia embassy in Madrid on Wednesday to call for the release of women activists who have been fighting for their rights in Saudi Arabia.

On the field, and despite the limited interest the games have drawn back in Spain, the semifinals offered some exciting contests. Madrid showed off the quality of its midfielders to overcome injuries to its forwards in a 3-1 win over Valencia on Wednesday, while Atletico stunned Barcelona with two late goals.

Traditionally the Super Cup was the league vs. cup winner. Barcelona won last season’s Liga, while Valencia claimed the Copa del Rey.

Madrid will still be without the injured Karim Benzema, Gareth Bale and Eden Hazard. Against Valencia, manager Zinedine Zidane successfully experimented with a line-up loaded with five midfielders, and three of them – Toni Kroos, Francisco “Isco” Alarcon and Luka Modric – found the net.

Zidane, however, was tight-lipped over

whether he would repeat the formula against Atletico at the King Abdullah stadium.

“I am not going to tell you how we are going to play,” Zidane said Friday. “The important thing is that we play on the attack, not with a certain scheme. The important thing is to have a balanced side.”

This will be the third time the crosstown rivals have met since the end of last season. Atletico embarrassed Madrid 7-3 in a preseason game in the United States in July. They then drew 0-0 at Atletico’s stadium in a Spanish league match in September.

Atletico coach Diego Simeone said that his two most in-form players, goalkeeper Jan Oblak and forward Angel Correa, have recovered from knocks they received against Barcelona. Oblak made several saves to keep his team alive against Lionel Messi’s Barcelona until Alvaro Morata and Correa struck to flip the score.

“Madrid is a team that we know very well,” Simeone said. “They transmit the sensation that they have to win, and then they do so. We are both teams that are extremely motivated to win this cup and we will both use all our weapons to win this game.”

Barcelona striker Luis Suarez to undergo knee surgery

Barcelona: Barcelona says Uruguay striker Luis Suarez will have surgery on Sunday for a right knee injury.

The Spanish club made the announcement on Saturday – two days after Suarez played the complete 90 minutes in a 3-2 loss to Atletico Madrid in the semifinals of the Spanish Super Cup being held in Saudi Arabia.

The 32-year-old Suarez is the club’s fourth all-time leading scorer with 191 goals in 270 matches. He has helped Barcelona win one Champions League, four Spanish league and four Copa del Rey titles.

Barcelona did not say how long it expects to be without its second-leading scorer this season after Lionel Messi. Suarez has 14 goals so far.

He will likely miss several Spanish league and cup matches during a January and February packed with games from the two domestic competitions, including an always demanding trip to Valencia on Jan. 25.

Barcelona plays Napoli in the Champions League round of 16, with the first leg in Italy on Feb. 25 and the second leg at Camp Nou on March 18.

Serena cruises into Auckland final; Osaka knocked out

REUTERS
WELLINGTON, JANUARY 11

SERENA WILLIAMS showed no signs of sentiment as she clinically dispatched teenager Serena Williams showed no signs of sentiment as she clinically dispatched teenager Amanda Anisimova 6-1 6-1 in just 45 minutes on Saturday to advance to the Auckland Classic final against Jessica Pegula.

Williams, who won the first of her 23 Grand Slam titles before Anisimova was born, gave the 18-year-old a harsh lesson in tennis reality and showed again that she was not prepared to let the next generation take over just yet. Anisimova said on Friday it had been a life-long dream to play Williams but she must have felt she was living a nightmare on the main court at Auckland Tennis Centre on Saturday. The 38-year-old gave the third-seed little opportunity to get into the match and was just too powerful for Anisimova, who had no answer to the pace, depth and angles of her returns and service game.

“I was definitely in the zone today and it was one of those days,” said Williams. “I knew I was playing a really great player so I knew that I had to come out serious.” The American is also in the doubles final on Sunday with good friend Caroline Wozniacki, who had her own hopes of a first Auckland title ended by Pegula 3-6-6-0 in the earlier semi-final. Wozniacki has been even present at the tournament since 2015 but is retiring after the Australian Open later this month. She had lost her two previous fi-

nals in Auckland, to Venus Williams in 2015, and Julia Georges in 2018. “Caroline has had an amazing career ... and I’m glad that I got to play her before she retired, but I am just happy to get the win and am excited to be in the final,” Pegula said.

“I definitely knew that if I played defensively, I wasn’t going to win that battle, because she is the best in the world at that, so I knew I had to step in, take my chances and trust my game.”

Wozniacki, who gained a measure of revenge on Georges in the quarter-finals on Friday, raced through the first set, but found herself 3-0 down in the second. Pegula’s lead, however, disappeared just as quickly as she had built it and Wozniacki battled back to 3-3, but the American managed to break the former world number one in the final game of the set to send it to a decider.

It was then virtually one-way traffic in the third set as the American opened up the court and moved the Dane around and raced away with the encounter, which she sealed on her second match point opportunity with a forehand winner.

Pliskova beats Osaka

Brisbane: Defending champion Karolina Pliskova saved a match point before prevailing in an epic slugfest with Naomi Osaka, while Madison Keys pulled off an escape of her own in the other semi-final in the Brisbane International on Saturday. Pliskova and Osaka served 29 aces between them and were often locked in fierce baseline rallies.

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