

No walk in the Melbourne Park

With his fortress under seige, Djokovic comes back from two-sets-to-one to derail Thiem and clinch eighth Australian Open title

HOWARD FENDRICH
MELBOURNE, FEBRUARY 2

NOVAK DJOKOVIC was looking weary and worn down. He felt dizzy and trailed Dominic Thiem in the Australian Open final — miscues mounting, deficit growing.

Djokovic did what he does, though. He refused to lose, waited for a chance to pounce and found his best tennis when absolutely necessary. Even threw in a wrinkle, serve-and-volleying twice when facing break point.

Regaining his stamina and strokes, and showing some gutsy creativity, Djokovic came back to edge Thiem 6-4, 4-6, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 Sunday night for an eighth Australian Open title, second in a row, and 17th Grand Slam trophy overall.

"I was on the brink of losing that match... I didn't feel that great," said Djokovic, who was seen multiple times by a doctor. "My energy," he explained, "completely collapsed."

Nonetheless, Djokovic improved his combined record in semifinals and finals at Melbourne Park to 16-0 and assured himself of returning to No. 1 in the rankings, replacing Rafael Nadal. No other man in the history of tennis has won this hard-court tournament more than six times. Only Roger Federer, with 20, and Nadal, with 19, have won more men's Grand Slam singles trophies than Djokovic.

"Amazing achievement. Unreal what you're doing throughout all these years," said the fifth-seeded Thiem, who is 0-3 in major finals. "You and also two other guys, I think you brought men's tennis to a complete new level."

Both finalists spoke about the devastating wildfires that have killed dozens of people and millions of animals around Australia. Djokovic also mentioned the recent deaths of NBA star Kobe Bryant and one of his daughters in a helicopter crash. Addressing Thiem, Djokovic said: "It wasn't meant to be tonight. Tough luck... You were very close to win it and you definitely have a lot more time in your career. I am sure you will definitely get one of the Grand Slam trophies. More than one."

A little more than six months after saving a pair of championship points against Federer en route to winning a five-set Wimbledon final, Djokovic again showed that he can't ever be counted out. It did not come easily this time for Djokovic, a 32-year-old from Serbia. He lost six games in a row in one stretch to Thiem, who plays a similar baseline game and eliminated Nadal in the quarterfinals.

Against the grain

Djokovic was down two sets to one. He was visited by a doctor and trainer in the third set and, desperate to hydrate, guzzled bottles of water and energy drink. He lectured the chair umpire about time violations.

This was not the dominant Djokovic who made a hard-to-believe total of nine unforced errors during his straight-set triumph over Nadal in the final a year ago. Djokovic eclipsed that total in the first set alone Sunday and finished with 57. It was a physical test offering plenty of entertaining exchanges, with 61 points lasting at least nine shots apiece.

"Very demanding," Thiem said. "Of course," he said, "I just feel a lot of emptiness right now."

At two key moments, Djokovic abandoned his usual grind-points-out script and went on the attack, rushing to the net after a serve when facing a break point — first, at 2-1 in the fourth set, then again at 2-1 in the fifth. Paid off both times. "Not characteristic of me," Djokovic said. "Kind of all-or-nothing."

Suddenly making a charge as his less-experienced foe faltered, Djokovic broke to lead 5-3 in the fourth set, helped by a sloppy volley into the net tape, a double-fault and a bad forehand by Thiem. Eventually, Djokovic would get to clutch the silver Australian Open trophy he also won in 2008, 2011-13, 2015-16 and 2019.

He adds that haul to his five titles from Wimbledon, three from the U.S. Open and one from the French Open.

Thiem, an Austrian who is 26, was the runner-up to Nadal at Roland Garros each of the



Regaining his stamina and strokes, and showing some gutsy creativity, Novak Djokovic edged Thiem 6-4, 4-6, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 for his 17th Grand Slam title. AP

past two years and was again trying to become the first man born in the 1990s to win a major singles title. Instead, the Big Three have won 13 consecutive Slams and 56 of the last 67.

"It's unique in sports history that the three best players — by far — are playing in the same era," Thiem said. "That's what makes it very, very difficult for other players to break through."

The status quo appeared in peril in the third set, when Djokovic merely watched and shook his head as a loby by Thiem curled over him and in. Djokovic didn't chase it. Wasn't entirely clear right then what the problem was, but perhaps he knew he needed to save some strength.

Heat, so often a factor in Melbourne, was not an issue. The crisp, cool conditions were pretty much ideal at the start, with a light breeze and the temperature around 70 degrees (20 Celsius). That dropped as the natural light faded, first leaving a violet ceiling of sky before nightfall arrived, accompanied by alarmingly loud squawks from a flock of seagulls perched on steel railings atop the arena.

Not surprisingly, given his experience and expertise, Djokovic came out loose, limber and locked in. Of the initial half-dozen points lasting at least nine strokes, he won all six. Within 13 minutes, he was ahead 3-0, as a chorus of his nickname — "No-le! No-le! No-le!" — rang out. Undaunted, Thiem displayed praiseworthy patience, and when Djokovic's aim and focus betrayed him, this became an intriguing contest.

At 4-all in the second set, Djokovic was warned by chair umpire Damien Dumusois for taking too much time before a serve. A poor drop shot found the net to set up break point, and Dumusois again cited Djokovic for letting the 25-second clock expire; the penalty was a fault. A tepid 85 mph second serve followed, and Djokovic flubbed a forehand to give Thiem a 5-4 lead. As Djokovic walked to the changeover, he tapped Dumusois on the left shoe, gave him a thumbs-up, then sat down and told him, "You made yourself famous."

That was part of a six-game run that gave Thiem the second set — Djokovic had taken 16 in a row since the opening round — and control of the third.

Just as it seemed Thiem might be on his way, Djokovic made a stand. AP

Carpe Thiem? Not quite: Austrian empty after loss

ASSOCIATED PRESS
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EMPTINESS. EXHAUSTION. All-too-familiar feelings for Dominic Thiem after a Grand Slam final.

He has lost three on the biggest stage at the majors, adding a five-set loss to Novak Djokovic on the hard courts at Melbourne Park on Sunday to his two against Rafael Nadal on the red clay at Roland Garros.

Each time he's come up against the greatest-of-all-time at that particular venue.

He had to beat top-seeded Nadal in the quarterfinals at the Australian Open, then a fellow up-and-comer, Alexander Zverev, in the semifinals.

Just to get a shot at Djokovic, who had won all seven previous times he'd reached the Australian final, Thiem had spent almost 18 1/2 hours on court and beaten four seeded players through six rounds. Djokovic had spent almost six fewer hours in action, and had only dropped one set in the tournament.

"I've rarely felt physically (so) tired, especially now after all the tension's gone," Thiem said after losing 6-4, 4-6, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 on Rod Laver Arena.

After recovering a break in the first set, Thiem surrendered it with a double-fault — his first. He rebounded and, from 4-4 in the second, won six straight games and took the next two sets, with his hard, flat ground strokes troubling Djokovic.

And then, after being one set from a breakthrough major title, the 26-year-old Austrian had to accept being runner-up again after a four-hour final. Even Djokovic admitted just one or two shots made the difference.

"I just feel a lot of emptiness right now. But, yeah, that's it. I know the feeling," Thiem said. "I did after the last two in Paris. But, yeah, already now I feel little bit of motivation to come back for the next



"I've rarely felt physically (so) tired, especially now after all the tension's gone," said Dominic Thiem after his third Grand Slam final defeat. Reuters

Grand Slam."

That'll be in Paris, in May.

He reckons it's just the fine details he needs to work on, and a bit of reshaping after honing his game specifically for the hard surface.

What made him most proud of his run in Australia, he said, was "the way I kept my level, the way I kept my tension over all the two weeks."

"I didn't have easy matches, especially from the quarters on. Beating Rafa in over four hours, then two days later going back out again against Sascha. Unbelievably in-

tense, close match. Then two days later going out again against Novak, who won the most titles here and again played on a very high level."

That gives him a brighter picture for the future.

"I'm very aware and sure now that I can play on a very high level for a full Grand Slam," Thiem said. "Didn't have any drops — it makes me very confident for the next big tournaments which are coming up."

Djokovic is among the experts who predict big things for Thiem.

"Congratulations to Dominic for an

REIGN SUPREME

17 The number of Grand Slam singles titles Novak Djokovic has won, the third-most among men in the Open Era, behind Roger Federer (20) and Rafael Nadal (19). Pete Sampras (14) and Roy Emerson (12) follow the Serbian's hauls.

4 Djokovic is now the fourth player to win at least eight titles at any one Grand Slam in the Open Era. Federer has 8 Wimbledon titles while Martina Navratilova has 9. Nadal leads the pack with 12 French Open titles.

1 Djokovic is the first man in the Open Era to win Grand Slam titles in three different decades, and third overall after Navratilova and Serena Williams. Sunday's win was also the first instance of Djokovic coming from two sets to one down to win a Major final, after failing to do so on seven occasions.

Definitely my favourite court, my favourite stadium in the world and I'm blessed to hold this trophy once again... I was on the brink of losing the match. Dominic disrupted my rhythm in my game at one point. He was a better player. Probably one point — and one shot — separated us tonight."

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

Silver linings

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE Thiem's run in Melbourne should help him shed his image as a pure clay-courter. Since a first-round defeat at last year's US Open, he has won 23 from 29 matches on the hard courts. The Austrian's only Masters title too was at Indian Wells last year.

SHOT SELECTION Against Djokovic, the number of backhand winners by Thiem was 5. The unforced errors: 25. On crucial points, Thiem went for a no-holds-barred Stan-Wawrinka ploy to blast the backhand down the line.

RUNNING INTO GOATS While he failed to win his first Major title for the third time, Thiem's final losses have also come against the best a Slam has to offer. Nadal has staved him off twice at Roland Garros, and 'King of Melbourne' Djokovic beat him on Sunday. Knowing his luck, the 26-year-old might run into Federer in the Wimbledon final this year.

Novak gets support... from India

SHAHID JUDGE
PUNE, FEBRUARY 2

VIKTOR TROICKI rushed off court faster than the player he had beaten 6-1, 6-4 to qualify for the main draw of the Tata Open Maharashtra. Time was off the essence for the veteran Serbian, for there was another match he wanted to catch — the Australian Open men's singles final.

"I gotta hurry up, it's the fifth set," he says, moments after compatriot Novak Djokovic forced Dominic Thiem into a deciding set in their summit clash in Melbourne. "I hope he wins. We've been spending a lot of time in Australia before I got injured. I wish him all the best and hope he wins. He's just a couple of games away."

In the few minutes that followed, the world no. 2 Djokovic managed to win the match 6-4, 4-6, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4, earning a 17th Grand Slam title and regaining top spot in the world rankings. And this came just a few weeks after he helped secure the inaugural ATP Cup title for Serbia — just like he did for his country's only Davis Cup title back in 2010.

"We have the number 1 in the world, that's helpful to have. (Djokovic) pretty much wins all of his matches, then (the rest of the team has) to win one more point somehow, even if it is ATP Cup, Davis Cup," Troicki says. "We have to come up with that point somehow, and that's how we manage to do it. We don't manage to do it always, but we try to and when we are successful at it, we're winning."

The 33-year-old, older by a year to his



Novak Djokovic and Viktor Troicki have helped Serbia win their only Davis Cup title in 2010, and the inaugural ATP Cup last month. Reuters

legendary compatriot, remembers meeting Djokovic for the first time at a youth tournament they were playing in. "He was eight, I was nine. We played a tournament in U-10s. I beat him 9-1, or 9-0, we're not sure about it. But that was our first meeting," he says.

That friendship has blossomed over the years and Djokovic has remained one of

Troicki's greatest supports on tour, particularly during the trying time for the latter when he faced a one-year ban in 2013 for drug abuse.

"When I had my toughest situation in my life, he was publicly supporting me and giving me great help. Always, with everything. He's helped me a lot through my career, he's a great person. I'm grateful to him and he's been a true friend," he says.

But it isn't just Troicki whom Djokovic has made a difference for. The former world no. 12, whose current ranking of 159 forced him to start his campaign in Pune in the qualifying rounds, remembers growing up in a country that was then warm-torn Yugoslavia, where funds for daily needs were scarce and tennis facilities even harder to find. But those times have changed, and Djokovic has been central to it.

"Tennis became very popular in Serbia over the years, probably the most popular sport. Novak is the number 1 and most famous person in the whole country and region. He's put our nation on the map with his results and all the things he does for our country," Troicki says. "People recognise it, kids want to be like him, and there's a lot of kids playing tennis now. It's different now. The federation is also supporting players more, we have more clubs and more courts to play."

Djokovic's 17 Grand Slam titles now has him trailing Rafael Nadal by two and Roger Federer by three. He's the player most likely to get the record by the time the Big Three of tennis decide to leave the game. But in his home country, he's long been the true face of the sport.

Back after physical, personal trauma, Prajnesh hopes to bounce back at home

SHAHID JUDGE
PUNE, FEBRUARY 2

THE LAST time Prajnesh Gunneswaran competed at a tournament in India, he was at a different level as a player. He carried with him the tag of being a top 100 player — ranked 95 — when he featured at the Pune Challenger in November. But that was a trying time for him as well, both on and off the court. Days earlier, he had lost his father, who had been his rock, and he'd been struggling with a wrist injury. In hindsight, he says, he "probably shouldn't have come."

Prajnesh turned pro in 2010, but the 30-year-old has lost five years to knee injuries, contemplated quitting, chugged on, built some momentum, got up to a career-high 75, but didn't manage to stay in the top 100 for too long. In all this time however, the now world no. 123 still remains the country's highest-ranked player, and along with Sumit Nagal, one of two Indians to enter the main draw of India's only ATP event, the Tata Open Maharashtra, on merit.

"Hurdles have always sort of been in my path, and I'm just used to it. I'm trying to figure things out. Had personal issues, tennis issues. So that's just the way it goes sometimes," he says. "And I think I've come out of it pretty well. Obviously, I was a little bit injured. So I couldn't play my best tennis, but things are getting better. And I think my tennis is there. I'm constantly improving. Once things fall in place, I will start getting results again."

At this time last year, Prajnesh entered the

After turning pro in 2010, the 30-year-old has lost five years to injuries, contemplated quitting, built some momentum, got up to a career-high 75, but couldn't stay in the top 100 for too long.

Chennai Challenger, reached the semifinals and broke into the top 100 for the first time in his career. It was a feat expected from the hard-hitting left-hander who had been making rapid progress up the rankings ladder. And the run continued. After qualifying for the main draw of the Indian Wells Masters 1000, he beat former world no. 18 Benoit Paire in the first round and followed it up by beating then world no. 18 Nikoloz Basilashvili of Georgia. Injuries though, soon caught up with him.

"I think up until the summer I had a very, very good run. By the time I came to the clay season in Europe, that was when my I started having shoulder issues, which is when my season kind of went downhill," Prajnesh says. "I was still playing though, playing bigger tournaments, I wasn't getting the results I wanted, which is not unexpected, because when you move up to a better standard, if you don't sort of play well enough, you're going to lose matches. I was trying to figure things out, understand how much better I needed to play or whether it was just a matter of belief, or if I needed to be fitter. The only way to really un-

derstand what you need is to be there. I was starting to understand it but then I got injured."

He played through the second half of the season with constant shoulder and wrist issues. The ranking dropped, and the personal tragedy came at a time when he was preparing for marriage. But he has moved on from that rough phase. At the Australian Open this year, he arguably had the best chance of becoming the first Indian since Somdev Devvarman at the US Open 2013 to win a singles main draw match at a major. He made the cut for the Round of 128 in Melbourne as a lucky loser, but against world no. 146 Tatsuma Ito, an elbow issue hampered him.

"That is really just because I hadn't played much tennis. Since I was resting my wrist, I just hadn't been serving so much. And then when I started to sort of go after the serve in the match, I just tweaked something," Prajnesh explains. Now back in Pune, the body is still not 100 per cent, but the belief is still intact. It's his mental capacity that has taken him through the injury struggles — the five years of knee issues when doctors struggled to diagnose the problem, the shoulder, wrist and elbow. The mental strength has helped him push through the lower echelons, getting past the Futures, making it through Challengers and now competing on the tour. It's that same attitude that, in a depleted foreign field at the Tata Open Maharashtra, ignites hopes for an Indian success. Paire, the maverick Frenchman is ranked 21 in the world and is the top seed. But Prajnesh has beaten him in the past. This year again, he's hoping to turn things around.