

## Sports

# Halep sets up Serena showdown as Djokovic relentlessly marches on

## Seventh seed Pliskova pushes through to Open last 16

**MELBOURNE:** World number one Simona Halep set up a headline last 16 showdown with Serena Williams by beating her sister Venus yesterday as Novak Djokovic's relentless drive towards more Australian Open glory cranked up another gear.

On day six at Melbourne Park, the Romanian finally hit form to pull off her best win of the year and cruise past the veteran American 6-2, 6-3. "I was super-motivated today," she said after being taken to three sets in both her opening two matches as she bounces back from a herniated disc that ended her 2018 season early.

"I have nothing to lose," she added, looking ahead to Monday's clash against 23-time Grand Slam winner Serena. "I playing against a great champion. It's going to be a bigger challenge but I'm ready to face it."

Williams crushed Ukrainian Dayana Yastremska 6-2, 6-1 before consoling her at the net as the teenager burst into tears. The ominous 37-year-old, seeded 16, has dropped just nine games in her three matches so far on her first return to the tournament since winning it in 2017 while pregnant. "I just play each match at a time, play as hard as I can and do the best I can. That really is all you can do," she said as she zeroes in on an eighth Australian title and a record-equalling 24th Slam crown.

Fourteen-time Grand Slam winner and top seed Djokovic is gunning for a record seventh Australian title. He dropped a set for the first time this year against fast-rising Canadian Denis Shapovalov, before demolishing him in the fourth stanza to win 6-3, 6-4, 4-6, 6-0.

"I just tried to be in the moment and weather the storm," said the Serb, who was unsettled when the lights were switched on in Rod Laver Arena for television reasons, despite it still being daylight.

"Completely unnecessary to turn on the lights," he said in roasting the organisers. Djokovic's victory means he is guaranteed to stay world number one when the new rankings are released after the tournament.

He next plays another up-and-coming star, Russia's

15th seed Daniil Medvedev, who eased past David Goffin and has yet to drop a set. Another young gun Alexander Zverev made the last 16 for the first time when he swatted aside Australian Alex Bolt in three sets and will play former world number three Milos Raonic for a place in the quarter-finals. Fourth seed Naomi Osaka looked down and out against Taiwanese veteran Hsieh Su-wei before battling back to win 7-5, 4-6, 6-1 and set up meeting with Latvia's Anastasija Sevastova.

### 'DIE OR WIN'

Osaka's win equals the 21-year-old's best performance at the Australian Open, where she reached the last 16 in 2018 but lost to Halep.

But she looked headed for the exit when she conceded the first set and was down 4-1 in the second, before winning five straight games to force a decider.

"I just didn't want to give up," said the Japanese, who received a code violation after throwing her racquet. Sixth seed Elina Svitolina struggled with a painful shoulder complaint that required treatment at every changeover, and medical timeouts, before she somehow beat China's Zhang Shuai 4-6, 6-4, 7-5 as the temperature rose in the centre court sunshine.

"I just told myself 'you're going to die or win'," said Svitolina, who scored her biggest career win by clinching the WTA Finals in Singapore last October. She will next meet 17th-seeded American Madison Keys, while Czech seventh seed Karolina Pliskova battled through to the Australian Open last 16 yesterday with a tough three-set win over Italy's Camila Giorgi.

Pliskova downed the 27th seeded Italian 6-4, 3-6, 6-2 after a 131 minute arm wrestle to set up a fourth round meeting with Spanish 18th seed Garbine Muguruza. Former world number one Pliskova took the first set at a canter and appeared to be cruising until Giorgi lifted in the second and forced a decider.

The Czech took a decisive break early in the final set



**MELBOURNE:** Czech Republic's Karolina Pliskova hits a return against Italy's Camila Giorgi during their women's singles match on day six of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. — AFP

after a marathon game that went for 13 minutes and went to deuce five times. Eighth seed Kei Nishikori made it back-to-back victories for Japan, following Osaka on court by beating Portugal's 44th-ranked Joao Sousa in three sets. The 29-year-old has won all three of his first

week matches on Margaret Court Arena to reach the last 16 for the seventh time in nine appearances.

"I love to play this court," said the 2014 US Open finalist after delighting a large contingent of Japanese fans. He next plays Spain's 23rd seed Pablo Carreno Busta.—AFP

## Rough return as speed queen Vonn battles for winning form

**CORTINA D'AMPEZZO:** US speed queen Lindsey Vonn conceded it's a daily battle to regain her winning form after trailing home joint-ninth in yesterday's World Cup downhill in Cortina d'Ampezzo, her second race after a two-month knee injury layoff.

The 34-year-old American, wearing knee braces, improved on her 15th place in Friday's race in the Italian Dolomites, but remains far from the lightning form that has reaped 82 World Cup wins. "It's a little bit rougher than I expected, but today was a step in the right direction," said Vonn. Her final chance in Cortina where she has won a record 12 times—six downhill and six Super-G—will be in today's Super-G for which US teammate Mikaela Shiffrin is the hot favourite. But for Vonn the challenge is how to become competitive as she targets Swedish great Ingemar Stenmark's all-time record of 86 World Cup wins before retiring at Lake Louise next December.

"I always hope to win races, but when you come down and you're 0.2sec off the lead it's not really a

positive experience," said a disappointed Vonn. "I know it's not going to get better, it's trying to figure out how best to deal with it."

"I just have to try and get the swelling out of my knee and keep the muscles going. It's a pretty extensive process." The former Olympic downhill champion refuses to be discouraged. After Cortina she heads to the World Cup in Garmisch, Germany, where she has won nine times and then on to the world championships in Sweden from February 5.

"I still have a lot more races this season, it's taking me a bit longer to be up and running," she continued. "Garmisch is always a good track for me. There's not much I can do, it's mostly figuring out how I can create power on the leg."

"Swimming helps, at 9.30 last night I was in the pool by myself. I'm working to put myself in as good a position as I can to win races." Vonn has battled back in the past from broken bones and torn ligaments, but her final season is the most challenging.

"I think I have had worse injuries that I have come back from but last year was a tough year. "Right now it's just building my confidence back up and hopefully my knee will be better for the world championship."

Ramona Siebenhofer made it two downhill wins in as many days, leading an Austrian 1-2 ahead of Nicole Schmidhofer. Siebenhofer, 27, chalked up just the second World Cup win of her career and finished four hundredths of a second ahead of Schmidhofer, who retains



**CORTINA D'AMPEZZO:** US skier Lindsey Vonn holds a press conference with her dog Lucy ahead of the Women's World Cup downhill, in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italian Alps. — AFP

the lead in the World Cup downhill standings.

Ilka Stuhec of Slovenia rounded out the placings at 0.51sec. The Slovenian, the 2017 World Cup downhill crystal globe champion, followed up her second place from Friday, as she also recently returned from a knee injury that sidelined her for 20 months.—AFP

## Bevin hangs on to tour lead after crash

**ADELAIDE:** Race leader Patrick Bevin crashed and fifth stage winner Caleb Ewan was disqualified on a dramatic penultimate day of Australia's Tour Down Under outside of Adelaide yesterday. New Zealander Bevin's ochre leader's jersey hopes were in the balance after he was taken to hospital with a suspected rib and collarbone injury from a crash nine kilometres (5.5 miles) from the finish at Strathalbyn.

Bevin hopped back on his bike while his CCC teammates waited for him and he was able to rejoin the peloton to not lose any time. Bevin will take a seven-second lead over South Africa's defending champion Daryl Impey into today's final stage.

There was further drama when Australia's 'pocket rocket' sprinter Caleb Ewan was disqualified after he was first across the finish line for what race commissaires said was an "irregular sprint". Ewan appeared to headbutt Belgian Jasper Philipsen as he attempted to take his spot on the wheel in front of him and Ewan was relegated to last and Philipsen declared the winner.

Bevin looked a forlorn sight as he dismounted from his bike and sought medical attention clutching his right side, bleeding from his leg and elbow and with the back of his jersey shredded. The CCC Team was hopeful Bevin would take his place at the start of today's final stage, featuring a gruelling hilltop finish to Willunga.

"We knew there was a crash and you see the race leader on the ground with three of our jerseys standing around," Team CCC owner Jim Ochowicz said. "We had to get a bike change because his bike was broken."

"It was so close to the finish that yeah, it's hard to get that back. But the whole team stopped and got him back in the game, now we've just got to wait and see." Canadian rider Mike Woods said that Impey had sportingly called for the peloton to slow after Bevin's crash.

Impey tweeted after the stage: "Another great team performance today. Happy to grab 5 seconds more but I hope @PaddyBevin is going to be ok and can race tomorrow. He has had an amazing race so far. "One mustn't try prosper off someone else's misfortune. I feel sorry for Bevin."

Ewan was relegated to last place in the group,



**ADELAIDE:** Race leader New Zealand's Patrick Bevin from the CCC Team celebrates after he retains the leader's jersey after narrowly missing the win during stage four of the Tour Down Under cycling race in Adelaide. — AFP

deducted 15 points from his place in the points classification and imposed a 30-second penalty on his overall race time. Consequently, the 20-year-old Philipsen recorded just his second career win and first on a UCI WorldTour stage.

The Sprint and King of the Mountain classifications are also set to be decided on the final stage today. With Peter Sagan (BORA-hansgrohe) promoted to second in the bunch sprint in the official results, the stage is set for a close finish.

Sagan sits six points behind Bevin in the sprint points classification, with Italian national road champion Elia Viviani (Deceuninck-Quick-Step) third a further five points back. Jason Lea (UniSA-Australia) continues to lead the King of the Mountains classification after collecting more points during the fifth stage and leads New Zealand's George Bennett (Jumbo Visma) by 14 points. With a maximum of 16 points up for grabs on each of the Willunga Hill climbs on Sunday, that lead is by no means secure. Today's final over 151.5 kilometres begins in McLaren Vale and finishes atop the notorious Willunga Hill, which will favour the climbers in the peloton.—AFP

## Badminton star Chen sets up Malaysia final against Son

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Chinese badminton star Chen Long powered into the Malaysia Masters final after easily beating defending champion Viktor Axelsen 21-13, 21-18 yesterday to set up a showdown against South Korea's Son Wan-ho.

Chen, seeded third in the tournament, was dominant from the outset, forcing his Danish opponent into deep pockets of the court as he dominated in the first game.

Axelsen tried to comeback in the second game, but was clearly troubled by a left knee injury that he suffered in his quarter-final win Friday, leaving Chen to cruise to victory. "I can see that he was clearly struggling on court. After the win, I asked him if he was alright and he told me he needs to get his knee checked," Chen said.

"I'm happy to have made my first final of the year. Today's affair against Son will be a 50/50 encounter. I know his game well as we are both from the same generation." Son checked into the final in Kuala Lumpur after his opponent Liew Daren conceded a walkover due to a foot injury.

"I tried all I could until the last minute hoping that I can still compete today, but in the end I had no choice but to give a walkover as the pain is unbearable," the Malaysian said in a message posted on Instagram.

The women's singles saw Thai defending champion Ratchanok Intanon set up a tantalising final against Spaniard Carolina Marin. Ratchanok dominated in her 21-16, 21-16 triumph over young Malaysian Goh Jin Wei, while Marin had little problem dispatching India's Saina Nehwal 21-16, 21-13.

The men's doubles saw world number one pair Marcus Fernaldi Gideon and Kevin Sanjaya Sukamuljo of Indonesia overcome Malaysians Goh V. Shem and Tan Wee Kiong 21-18, 24-22 to set up a final against Ong Yew Sin and Teo Ee Yi.

### Results (x denotes seeding)

**Men's singles**  
Chen Long (CHN<sup>x3</sup>) bt Viktor Axelsen (DEN<sup>x5</sup>) 21-13, 21-18  
Son Wan-ho (KOR<sup>x4</sup>) walkover Liew Daren (MAS)

**Women's singles**  
Ratchanok Intanon (THA<sup>x6</sup>) bt Goh Jin Wei (MAS) 21-16, 21-16  
Carolina Marin (ESP<sup>x4</sup>) bt Saina Nehwal (IND<sup>x7</sup>) 21-16, 21-13

**Men's doubles**  
Marcus Fernaldi Gideon/Kevin Sanjaya Sukamuljo (INA<sup>x1</sup>) bt Goh V. Shem/Tan Wee Kiong (MAS) 21-18, 24-22  
Ong Yew Sin/Teo Ee Yi (MAS) bt Aaron Chia/Soh Wooi Yik (MAS) 21-6, 18-21, 21-19

**Women's doubles**  
Greysia Polii/Apriyani Rahayu (INA<sup>x4</sup>) bt Misaki Matsutomo/Ayaka Takahashi (JPN<sup>x2</sup>) 20-22, 21-13, 21-19  
Yuki Fukushima/Sayaka Hirota (JPN<sup>x1</sup>) bt Mayu Matsumoto/Wakana Nagahara (JPN<sup>x3</sup>) 21-13, 21-14. — AFP

## RUSADA pleads case ahead of WADA meeting

**MOSCOW:** The head of the Russian doping agency, RUSADA, has written to WADA before the global body's executive committee meets on Tuesday when recommendations on Russia's compliance in the long-running doping saga are set to be discussed.

In the letter dated January 18, a copy of which was issued to the media yesterday, director Yuri Ganus said it was not his agency's fault that a key deadline was missed to hand over data from a drug-tainted Moscow lab to WADA investigators.

"I assure you that although RUSADA has no authority and rights to provide access (to the lab's data)... the agency made and is making efforts to ensure fulfilment of the WADA Executive Committee requirements under September 20, 2018 by the deadline," it says.

WADA had demanded in September that the data be handed over by the end of 2018. But the transfer did not happen as planned last month due to Russian authorities raising objections to the WADA experts' equipment. WADA said Friday its representatives had finally "successfully retrieved" the data during a visit earlier this week. It will be examined in a bid to shed light on which Russian competitors were guilty of doping and who can be cleared to compete.

Richard McLaren, the Canadian lawyer whose 2016 report exposed state-sponsored doping in Russia, said the December data hold-up was "puzzling" and suggested it was caused by a "power struggle" within the country. In his letter, Ganus listed the various strides his agency made to be fully reinstated following its suspension in 2016 over McLaren's findings. "The agency underwent substantial, full and profound transformation... having replaced more than 90 percent of its staff and dismissed 100 percent of doping control officers," the letter said.—AFP