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Djokovic downs Delbonis in Miami Open

Halep battles into 4th round, Sloane Stephens's title defense ends



MIAMI GARDENS: Simona Halep of Romania returns a shot to Polona Hercog of Slovenia during Day 7 of the Miami Open presented by Itaú at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. — AFP

MIAMI: Novak Djokovic remains on course for a record seventh Miami Open title, but the world number one admitted to a loss of focus in a 7-5, 4-6, 6-1 victory over spirited Federico Delbonis which booked his place in the last 16.

Djokovic is hoping to eclipse Andre Agassi's six ATP crowns in South Florida over the next week and although the 31-year-old endured some shaky moments at Hard Rock Stadium, he still possessed enough quality during the key moments to see off the battling Delbonis.

The Serbian, though, wasn't happy with letting a 5-2 advantage slip in the first set and became furious with himself as the second squirmed from his grasp.

He will need to tighten up his game if he is to reach next Sunday's final with Roberto Bautista Agut waiting in the

fourth round after the Spaniard defeated Italian Fabio Fognini 6-4, 6-4.

"To be honest, I lost my focus," said Djokovic who smashed 36 winners compared to 24 from Delbonis. "I should have done better I think mentally than I have done at the end of the first two sets."

"I managed to really play well last couple games of first set, go up a break, put myself in front, then I played a couple of really bad service games. Credit to Federico, he stepped in." Djokovic had looked impressive in the second round win over Bernard Tomic and the Serbian continued his decent form by immediately imposing himself onto the Argentine.

Djokovic moved 5-2 ahead but after he missed a set point opportunity on the Delbonis serve, his game deserted him and suddenly, the South American had a spring

in his step.

Delbonis had opportunities to steal ahead, yet calling on all his experience and mental resolve, the Serbian was able to hold firm and take the opener.

The world number one was getting incredibly frustrated, he received a warning for racket abuse and was furious for allowing a 3-1 lead to slip in the second, yet credit to Delbonis who stayed calm and served out confidently to force a decider, something which looked beyond him midway through the opening set.

He couldn't keep the pressure on, however, and when Djokovic managed to get 3-1 ahead, this time there was no way back for the 28-year-old from Azul who rightly received an ovation from the center court crowd for his monumental efforts.

"I think last four games were terrific, so

I ended up in a positive way," Djokovic added. Defending champion John Isner blew Spain's Albert Ramos-Vinolas off court with serves touching 139 mph as the American sealed an ultimately comprehensive 7-5, 7-6 (8-6) win to set up an intriguing match with Kyle Edmund in the last 16 after the British number one impressively saw off Canadian Milos Raonic 6-4 6-4.

In the women's draw, Simona Halep kept alive hopes of regaining the world number one ranking Sunday, beating Polona Hercog 5-7, 7-6 (7/1), 6-2 to reach the last 16 where she will play Venus Williams.

Halep, 27, lost her place at the top of the rankings following Naomi Osaka's triumph at the Australian Open earlier this year.

But with the Japanese faltering here on

Saturday, Halep can return to the position she last held at the end of 2018 if she lands the Miami Open for the first time.

"It's always tough against Venus," said the current world number three, who has beaten the American in their previous three encounters. "I'm not going to say that it's going to be easier because I won the last matches against her. It's a big challenge for me." Seven-time Grand Slam champion Williams, meanwhile, swept past Russian Daria Kasatkina 6-3, 6-1. "Simona always plays flawless tennis against me, so I have to be ready for that," Williams said.

Elsewhere in women's action, American Sloane Stephens's title defense ended in a 6-3, 6-2 loss to Germany's Tatjana Maria. It was another disappointing ending for Stephens, who fell in the third round at Indian Wells. —AFP

Rockets clinch playoff spot, Warriors wins

LOS ANGELES: James Harden delivered 28 points as the Houston Rockets punched their ticket to the NBA postseason with a 113-90 win over the New Orleans Pelicans on Sunday. Harden, who scored a combined 118 points in his previous two games, didn't need to maintain his torrid pace against the Pelicans.

The Rockets led by 19 at the half and Harden's supporting cast did their job by shutting down the Pelicans in the second and not allowing them to get back into the contest. "We were professional tonight

from the beginning of the game," Harden said. "We've had previous games where teams weren't as good, or whatever you want to call it, and we kind of let up and we let one slip. So that was a good job from top to bottom."

NBA scoring leader Harden exploded for a career-high-tying 61 points in a win over San Antonio on Friday after netting 57 points in a loss to Memphis on Wednesday. Harden, who is averaging 36.4 points per game, hit 10 of 19 shots from the floor and made six threes for the Rockets, who remained in third place in the Western Conference. Rockets guards Eric Gordon scored 18 points and Chris Paul had 10 points and 13 assists against their former Pelican team.

Elsewhere, Giannis Antetokounmpo tallied 26 points and 10 rebounds as the NBA-leading Milwaukee Bucks avenged a loss to Cleveland earlier in the week by beating the

Cavaliers 127-105.

Antetokounmpo missed two of the three previous games with an ankle injury and did not play four days ago when the Cavaliers beat the Bucks 107-102.

He had a big impact on Sunday, adding seven assists, blocking four shots and shooting 11-of-16 from the field in 32 minutes of playing time.

Milwaukee improved to a league-leading 55-19 record, ahead of the Toronto Raptors, who are 51-23. George Hill, who was traded to the Bucks by the Cavaliers in December, and Khris Middleton scored 17 points each, and Brook Lopez scored all 14 of his points in the first half for Milwaukee.

Kevin Love finished with 20 points, 19 rebounds and four three pointers in the loss. In Oakland, Stephen Curry returned from a rest game to score 26 points, Klay Thompson finished with 24 and the Golden State Warriors rebounded from an embar-

assing blowout loss with a 121-114 win over the Detroit Pistons.

The Warriors decided to rest Curry on Saturday and it cost them as they were clobbered 126-91 by the Dallas Mavericks. He came back strong against the Pistons as Kevin Durant also finished with 14 points and 11 assists.

The Warriors improved to 50-23 on the season and moved back into the first seed in the Western Conference by a half-game over Denver. This is the sixth consecutive season Golden State has reached 50 wins.

"It's kind of surreal, to be honest," Warriors guard Curry said after the game. "You talk about the history of the organization, how hard it is to win NBA games, win championships and string together (wins) year after year after year."

Also, Lou Williams scored 15 of his game-high 29 points in the fourth quarter as the Los Angeles Clippers won their fifth

consecutive game with a 124-113 victory over the hapless New York Knicks.

Danilo Gallinari drained a clutch three pointer in the fourth en route to a 26-point performance for the Clippers, who vaulted into sole possession of fifth place in the Western Conference.

The Clippers are trying to win as many games as possible late in the season to improve their playoff position and avoid having to play a top-ranked team like Golden State. "We're ready to play whoever we end up playing," coach Doc Rivers said. "In the meantime, let's just keep winning games and everything will take care of itself." The struggling Knicks have now reached 60 losses on the season. They have lost four straight and 12 of their last 13. New York must win at least three of their eight remaining games to avoid tying or exceeding the worst record (17-65) in team history. —AFP