



Nadal holds off late comeback to win



Rafael Nadal of Spain reacts during the men's singles second round match against Leonardo Mayer of Argentina

Melbourne

World No. 1 Rafael Nadal continued his quest for a 17th Grand Slam championship with an often hard-fought second-round victory over Leonardo Mayer on Wednesday evening at the Australian Open.

At times, Nadal, the 2009 champion, was left frustrated by Mayer's resilience, but ultimately the Spanish superstar extended his perfect FedEx ATP Head2Head record to 5-0 against the Argentine with a 6-3, 6-4, 7-6(4) win in two hours and 38 minutes.

"It was an important victory for me," Nadal told Roger Rasheed in an on-court interview. "[Mayer is] always a tough opponent. I had to hit some great shots in the tie-break. I'm happy to be in the third round after a while without being in competition."

Nadal, who is now 53-11 lifetime at Melbourne Park, will face Bosnia and Herzegovina's Damir Dzumhur in the third round. Dzumhur, the No. 26 seed, struck 47 winners in beating John Millman of Australia 7-5, 3-6, 6-4, 6-1 over two hours and 39 minutes earlier in the day.

"Damir has improved a lot [since we played at 2016 Miami]," said Nadal. "He is a tough opponent... [and] he knows how to play tennis very well... The only way to win is play at a higher rhythm than him and try to play aggressive, try to [play with] the highest intensity possible out there. That's what I going to try. I hope to be ready to

make that happen."

Nadal was troubled on serve by Mayer on three occasions, in the fifth game of the first set when the Spaniard recovered from 15/40 (after two groundstroke errors from Mayer); at 2-3, 30/40 in the third set (with a powerful forehand winner), then, when Nadal served for the match. Mayer broke back for 5-5 in the third set, with a gutsy crosscourt backhand winner that left Nadal flat-footed.

When asked about his failure to close out the match, when he served at 5-4 in the third set, Nadal said, "I was not losing the game because I was too nervous, because I felt too much tension. He played a great game, all the returns in [and] playing so aggressively... I had small chances. I held until deuce two times, but that's it. He really went for the game."

"I could have served a little bit better, maybe, yes. But I didn't serve worse that game than the rest of the games that I won."

Having beaten the Dominican Republic's Victor Estrella Burgos for the loss of three games in the first round, Nadal used his big-match experience to overcome Mayer, who proved to be a different proposition. Nadal committed just 10 unforced errors and struck 40 winners. Mayer, who took a set off Nadal in the 2017 US Open third round, hit 48 winners - including 15 aces - in an encounter that delayed the start of Wednesday's night session on Rod Laver Arena. (*atpworldtour*)