

Sabalenka favourite at Australian Open but faces Swiatek, US threats

AFP | Melbourne

Top-ranked Aryna Sabalenka is favourite to win a third Australian Open in four years but faces strong competition from a United States contingent led by Coco Gauff and defending champion Madison Keys.

World number two Iga Swiatek is another big threat while two-time Melbourne champion Naomi Osaka will hope to be in the mix when the first Grand Slam of the year begins on Sunday.

Keys stunned title-holder Sabalenka 12 months ago in a classic three-set final to win her first major title aged 29.

But she failed to kick on from there, not winning another tournament all year, and the world number nine will have a target on her back as the title holder.

Three other Americans are ranked inside the world's top 10: Gauff (third), Amanda Anisimova (fourth) and Jessica Pegula (sixth).

The 21-year-old Gauff last year beat Sabalenka at the French Open for her second major crown, but her best performance



Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus waves to the fans after a match

on the Melbourne Park hardcourts was making the semi-finals in 2024.

Speaking at the mixed-teams United Cup, where she launched her 2026 campaign, Gauff said she spent the off-season “just overall becoming better and more comfortable with my

game”.

Her serve has been her biggest failing and she suffered a surprise defeat to Spain's Jessica Bouzas Maneiro at the United Cup, but recovered to defeat Swiatek 6-4, 6-2 in a statement victory. It was Gauff's fourth win in a row over Swiatek.

The 24-year-old Anisimova has emerged as a serious threat after enjoying the best year of her career in 2025, reaching the finals of Wimbledon and the US Open, and winning 1000 titles in Beijing and Qatar.

She also made the season-ending WTA Finals for the first time,

going down to Sabalenka in three sets in a high-octane semi-final.

“She always pushes me to play my best tennis,” said Sabalenka.

Like Pegula, a first major title remains elusive for Anisimova despite going close.

Swiatek, Sabalenka's long-term rival for the top ranking, is overdue something special in Melbourne.

The Pole is a six-time Grand Slam champion and the Australian Open is the only major she has yet to win.

She matched her best Melbourne performance by reaching last year's semi-finals, and did so in rampant style, only to lose to an inspired Keys.

“At a Grand Slam you have to really play great for two weeks, not have any bad days, be consistent,” the 24-year-old said at the United Cup.

Japan's former world number one Osaka would be a popular winner if she were to add to her 2019 and 2021 Melbourne triumphs.

Now ranked 16th, the 28-year-old must rank as an outsider, capable of conjuring up her best tennis in flashes but unable to do it consistently and stay fit for long stretches.

World number five Elena Rybakina, the Moscow-born Kazakh, is another to watch.

Imperious Sabalenka

It is hard to look beyond Sabalenka.

Having been stunned by the unfancied Keys, the Belarusian suffered more Grand Slam heartbreak in the French Open final against Gauff.

She then went down to Anisimova in the Wimbledon last four, before roaring back to get revenge over the American and retain her US Open title.

The Australian Open champion in 2023 and 2024, Sabalenka will be in an unfamiliar role when she goes into the tournament as runner-up from 12 months ago.

“Honestly, there is no difference,” the hard-hitting Sabalenka said in Brisbane this month, where she won the title for a second successive year in an ominous statement of intent.

“Every time, if I'm defending champion, if I lost first round last year, the goal is always the same -- to bring my best tennis and to improve my game.”

Al Khaldiya Strengthen Hold On Title



Al Khaldiya players celebrate their third goal against A'ali

Hussain Almaskati
TDT | Manama

Matchweek 12 of the Nasr bin Hamad Premier League continued to shape the season yesterday, with table-toppers Al Khaldiya cruising to a 3-0 win over A'ali at Bahrain National Stadium, while Al Malkiya were held to a goalless draw by Al Hidd at Shaikh Ali bin Mohammed Stadium.

Al Khaldiya, led by Tunisian manager Lassaad Chaabi, who took charge towards the end of 2025, took control early against A'ali. In the 15th minute, Moroccan playmaker Saifeddine Bouhra delivered a dangerous freekick cross, which Ahmed Bughammar glanced on. The ball deflected slightly off an A'ali defender and crept into the bottom corner, giving the hosts an early advantage.

The momentum stayed with the men in yellow, who doubled their lead just before halftime through Anas Ouahim. A cross from Badar Bashir appeared to be cleared by the A'ali defence, but a half-clearance fell perfectly for Ouahim, who calmly slotted the ball under the keeper.

A'ali had a chance to spark a comeback when Layton Nduwku was awarded a penalty in the 67th minute after Ayoub El Amloud fouled him in the box. Ricardo Silva, however, guessed correctly and saved the spot-kick, maintaining Al Khaldiya's firm grip on the game. The miss proved costly, as Al Khaldiya added a third goal just three minutes later. El Amloud, redeeming himself after conceding the penalty, capitalised on Ouahim's rebound, volleying the ball off the turf and into the net to seal a ruthless 3-0 victory.

While Al Khaldiya celebrated, Al Malkiya and Al Hidd battled to a stalemate in a match defined by missed opportunities. Despite creating chances, neither side could break the deadlock, leaving both teams to settle for a point at 0-0.

Yesterday's results leave Al Khaldiya at the top of the table with 27 points, stretching their advantage as title favourites. A'ali remain in eighth with 13 points, while Al Malkiya stay fourth on 20, missing the chance to close the gap on reigning champions Muharraq. Al Hidd hold sixth with 14 points, continuing to struggle for consistency. Matchweek 12 continues tonight, with Muharraq facing Al Ahli at Khalifa Sports City and Sitra taking on Bahrain Club at Shaikh Ali bin Mohammed Stadium, both fixtures kicking off at 7pm.

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