

Ominous Serena, Djokovic make Open statements

Alexander Zverev hits 'perfection' as he cruises into Australian Open second round

● Veteran Venus battles back to reach second round

● Osaka beats the bugs to power into second round

● Nishikori survives massive scare after qualifier wilts in heat

AFP | Melbourne

A focused Serena Williams sent an ominous Australian Open warning with a 49-minute first-round demolition yesterday as world number one Novak Djokovic destroyed his opponent as he targets a record seventh title.

The American giant is bidding to match Margaret Court's record of 24 Grand Slam crowns on her first return to Melbourne Park since winning in 2017 while eight weeks pregnant.

Now 37, she kept a low profile in the lead-up to the opening major of the year and came out of the blocks flying against fellow mum Tatjana Maria, pummeling her German opponent 6-0, 6-2.

Sporting a striking jade green jumpsuit and fine mesh stockings on Rod Laver Arena, the 16th seed wasted no time in get-



Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return against Mitchell Krueger of the US

ting out of the blistering Melbourne heat and said it was good to be back.

"The last time I was here I was pregnant and playing at the same time which is insane," she said. "It's weird walking back on -- by myself this time -- it feels good. I have so many memories from last time I was here."

Bidding for an eighth Mel-

bourne Park crown, few are betting against Williams despite her low seeding and she next faces Canadian Eugenie Bouchard who eased past China's Peng Shuai.

Williams played at the mixed teams Hopman Cup in Perth this month, but her appearance yesterday was her first outing on tour since a meltdown in losing

the US Open final to Naomi Osaka in September.

Japan's Osaka, seeded four, begins her campaign in the night match on Rod Laver Arena against Poland's Magda Linette.

Fourth seed Alexander Zverev, who is looking to win his first Slam title and establish himself as a serious threat to Djokovic, Federer and Rafael Nadal,

cruised past Aljaz Bedene 6-4, 6-1, 6-4.

Escape act

But eighth seed Kei Nishikori, who won in Brisbane last week, had a lucky escape.

The Japanese star looked down and out against little known qualifier Kamil Majchrzak, losing the first two sets before the Pole began badly cramping.

He bravely fought on before calling it a day after winning just two of the next 17 games.

Elsewhere, 2014 champion Stan Wawrinka benefited from an opponent pulling out, with Ernests Gulbis calling it quits after hurting his back in the second set.

Among the women, sixth seed Elina Svitolina easily progressed, as did Williams' sister Venus, who incredibly played her first Grand Slam tournament 22 years ago.

Seventh seed Karolina Pliskova, who has made the quarter-finals in her last two appearances at Melbourne Park, also went through, but 10th seed Darya Kasatkina slumped out to Switzerland's Timea Bacsinszky.

Arsenal goalkeeper Petr Cech to retire at end of season

AFP | London

Arsenal goalkeeper Petr Cech announced yesterday that he will retire at the end of the season.

The 36-year-old, who won four Premier League titles with Chelsea, revealed his decision on Twitter.

He wrote: "This is my 20th season as a professional player and it is 20 years since I signed my first professional contract, so it feels like the right time to announce that I will retire at the end of this season."

The Czech, who arrived in the Premier League with Chelsea in 2004 and moved to Arsenal in 2015, added: "Having played 15 years in the Premier League and won every single trophy possible, I feel like I have achieved everything I set out to achieve."

"I will continue to work hard at Arsenal to hopefully win one more trophy this season, then I am looking forward to seeing what life holds for me off the pitch."

Cech joined Arsenal in 2015 and has made 129 appearances for the Gunners after winning multiple trophies at rivals Chelsea.



Petr Cech

Viviani wins opening Tour Down Under stage in brutal heat



Italian Elia Viviani of Deceuninck-Quick-Step celebrates after winning the first stage of the 'Tour Down Under' cycling race

AFP | Adelaide, Australia

Italy's Elia Viviani won a tight finish to take the opening stage of Australia's Tour Down Under in brutal temperatures in Adelaide yesterday.

Deceuninck-Quick-Step's Viviani, the omnium gold medalist at the 2016 Rio Olympics and one of the world's leading sprinters, powered out of the pack to reel in Germany's Max Walscheid and claim the ochre jersey after the first of six stages.

Walscheid of Team Sunweb finished second across the line ahead of another Italian in the CCC Team, Jakub Mareczko.

It was a reversal of fortunes for Viviani, 29, who crashed on the final lap of Sunday's Down Under Classic criterium leading into the tour.

"When you start the World Tour season with the stage win and the leader's jersey here in Tour Down Under, it's the best way," said Viviani.

"Now we know we've done a good job during the winter -- that's the question we've already answered."

Viviani comes into the Tour Down Under on the back of a successful 2018 season.

The Italian won 18 races, including stage 3 at Tour Down Under, overall classification at Dubai Tour, four stages at Giro d'Italia, Hamburg Cycloclassics race and three stages at Vuelta a Espana.

The riders braved temperatures hovering above 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) in the opening 129-kilometre (80-mile) stage from North Adelaide to Port Adelaide.

Dhoni, Kohli steer India to win over Australia

● India gain series-levelling win against Australia forcing the series into decider

AFP | Adelaide, Australia

Veteran wicketkeeper Mahendra Singh Dhoni steered India to a six-wicket victory over Australia in the second one-day international to level the series in Adelaide yesterday.

Former skipper Dhoni, playing in his 334th ODI, coolly guided India across the line with four balls to spare to back up a dazzling century from captain Virat Kohli.

India successfully chased down a target of 299 runs set by Australia who scored 298 for nine with Shaun Marsh scoring 131 off 123 balls.



India's Virat Kohli plays a shot

The three-match series now goes to a decider in Melbourne on Friday after Australia won the opening game in Sydney by 34 runs.

"Tonight was an MS (Dhoni) classic," man-of-the-match Kohli said. "He takes the game till the end, when only he knows what's going on in his mind, and he backs himself to hit those big shots at the end."

"And hats off to Dinesh (Karthik) too, he came in and took the pressure off him."

When Kohli holed out to Glenn Maxwell at deep mid-wicket to end his stellar

knock of 104 off 112 balls, it was 37-year-old Dhoni who took charge to pilot his side home with support from Karthik with an unbeaten 25.

Dhoni was physically struggling in the hot conditions and needed treatment from the team physio to finish his match-winning knock and keep India alive in the series.

India lost four wickets in their chase after Australia's total.

Shikhar Dhawan hit out before he was snapped up by Usman Khawaja at mid-wicket off Jason Behrendorff for 32 from 28 balls in the eighth over.

Australia	
A. Carey c Dhawan b Shami	18
A. Finch b Kumar	6
U. Khawaja run out (Jadeja)	21
S. Marsh c Jadeja b Kumar	131
P. Handscomb st Dhoni b Jadeja	20
M. Stoinis c Dhoni b Shami	29
G. Maxwell c Karthik b Kumar	48
J. Richardson c Dhawan b Shami	2
N. Lyon not out	12
P. Siddle c Kohli b Kumar	0
J. Behrendorff not out	1
Extras (lb4, w6)	10
Total (9 wickets; 50 overs)	298
India	
R. Sharma c Handscomb b Stoinis	43
S. Dhawan c Khawaja b Behrendorff	32
V. Kohli c Maxwell b Richardson	104
A. Rayudu c Stoinis b Maxwell	24
M.S. Dhoni not out	55
D. Karthik not out	25
Extras (lb9, w7)	16
Total (4 wickets; 49.2 overs)	299

India were sailing along before Sydney centurion Rohit Sharma on 43 top-edged Marcus Stoinis to deep forward square where Peter Handscomb, looking into the setting sun, took a safe catch to break up a dangerous 54-run partnership with Kohli.

Ambati Rayudu was the third wicket to fall caught at deep mid-wicket by Stoinis off Maxwell for 24.

Kohli was annoyed to get out with the job unfinished and six overs left but Dhoni used his vast experience to get his team safely home.