

Serena, Djokovic in charge

Fourth seed Alexander Zverev scrapes into Australian Open third round

● Nishikori back from brink to overcome Karlovic in thriller

● Reluctant star Osaka rockets to Aussie Open third round

● Harried Halep staggers into Open clash with Venus

AFP | Melbourne

Serena Williams stepped up her drive for a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam yesterday by swatting aside Eugenie Bouchard, as world number one Novak Djokovic won an emotional 2008 Australian Open final rematch with Jo-Wilfried Tsonga.

But women's top seed Simona Halep and young gun Alexander Zverev had to dig deep to make



Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return against France's Jo-Wilfried Tsonga

the third round on a day of epic battles and the latest start to a match ever at the tournament.

American great Williams followed up her first round 49-minute romp by spending just 70 minutes on Rod Laver Arena to dispose of the Canadian 6-2, 6-2.

"It wasn't an easy match tonight," said the 37-year-old, seeded just 16.

"So I knew 'Serena, you've got to come out hot, you've got to come out firing, she's a really good player and I haven't had many matches since last year'."

Williams is bidding to match Margaret Court's record of 24 Grand Slam crowns, and win an eighth in Australia, on her first return to Melbourne Park since

lifting the trophy in 2017 while pregnant.

Serbian top seed Djokovic is also looking to make history by winning a seventh title.

He was too good again for France's Tsonga, who he beat in the 2008 final, rolling through 6-3, 7-5, 6-4.

"You could feel the tension on court at the beginning. We felt a lot of emotion and tried to play a great game," said Djokovic as the memories of that tense final came flooding back.

In contrast, world number one Halep staggered through against American Sofia Kenin 6-3, 6-7 (5/7), 6-4 -- her second three-set test in a row.

"I have no idea how I won

this, it's so tough to explain what happened on court," said the French Open champion, who now meets Venus Williams after the 38-year-old rolled back the years to beat France's Alize Cornet.

In another titanic battle, Canadian Milos Raonic ousted 2014 champion Stan Wawrinka in four tightly-contested sets that all went to tie-breaks, while eighth seed Kei Nishikori was stretched to a draining five sets against Ivo Karlovic.

Seventh seed Dominic Thiem limped out when he retired while losing 7-5, 6-4, 2-0 to young Australian wildcard Alexei Popyrin.

Zverev, hailed as a flag-bear-

er for the next generation, also struggled against veteran world number 36 Jeremy Chardy, before putting him away 7-6 (7/5), 6-4, 5-7, 6-7 (6/8), 6-1.

Amid rain delays and drawn-out matches, Spain's Garbine Muguruza and Britain's Johanna Konta didn't get on court until half-past midnight - the latest start to a match in the event's history.

US Open champion and fourth seed Naomi Osaka had it relatively easy, sweeping past Slovenia's Tamara Zidansek 6-2, 6-4 with the roof closed on Margaret Court Arena due to the rain.

The 21-year-old's breakthrough at Flushing Meadow over Serena Williams last year made her a new standard bearer for tennis in her Japanese homeland and Asia, and she is working hard on living up to the hype.

"I thought I served alright, this was my first time playing her and I'm just happy to win to be honest," Osaka said after setting up a clash with Taiwan's Hsieh Su-wei.

In contrast, Asia's top-ranked

men's player Nishikori needed an energy-sapping 3hr 48min to get past big-serving Croat Karlovic 6-3, 7-6 (8/6), 5-7, 7-6 (10/7) in humid conditions.

Sixteenth seed Raonic emerged the victor against Wawrinka, a three-time Grand Slam champion who is on the comeback trail from injury.

The Swiss, unseeded for the first time since his debut in 2006, fell 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (8/6), 7-6 (13/11), 7-6 (7/5).

Despite being seeded six and seven respectively, neither Elina Svitolina or Karolina Pliskova has progressed further than the last eight at the Australian Open.

But self-assured Svitolina is bubbling with confidence after dismantling Viktoria Kuzmova 6-4, 6-1, while Pliskova woke up after losing the first set to race past Madison Brengle 4-6, 6-1, 6-0.

Other women through included Italy's Camila Giorgi and China's impressive Wang Qiang. Men still in the hunt included Croat Borna Coric and Spain's Pablo Carreno-Busta.



Serena Williams of the US plays a backhand return during her women's singles match against Canada's Eugenie Bouchard



Despite being seeded six and seven respectively, neither Elina Svitolina or Karolina Pliskova has progressed further than the last eight at the Australian Open

Sagan closes in on lead with stage win

AFP | Adelaide, Australia

Triple world champion Peter Sagan held off former race winners Luis Leon Sanchez and Daryl Impey to win stage three and close in on the overall lead of Australia's Tour Down Under yesterday.

The Slovak Bora-Hansgrohe sprint superstar repeated his victory in last year's corresponding stage in Uraidla, edging out Spain's Sanchez on the line in the 146.2-kilometre (90-mile) leg through the Adelaide Hills in South Australia.

Sagan, who won consecutive world road race championships from 2015 to 2017, closed to within one point of overall tour leader Patrick Bevin of New Zealand.

Sagan said his experience racing on the same roads last year helped him in the closing stages.



(L-R) Luis Len Snchez of Spain and Astana Pro Team, Peter Sagan of Slovakia and Team Bora-Hansgrohe and Daryl Impey of South Africa and Team Mitchelton-Scott after crossing the finish line

"I won by a little bit but I won and I am very happy with that," he said.

"On the last climb, I said, 'It's going to be the same as last year again.' In the end it was like copy paper.

"My Bora-Hansgrohe team worked hard to keep me on the front and take care of me. In the end I had a lot of energy for the last lap and it was really under control."

Sanchez is in third place overall a further nine seconds be-

hind, with Australia's Michael Storer fourth (10 seconds) and defending champion Impey fifth (11 seconds).

It was a punishing stage with temperatures around 35C (95F) and riders having to negotiate six undulating circuits, including six tilts up the sapping Spring Gully Road and the up-and-down twists and turns rising towards the finish at Uraidla.

In an eventful stage there were a few attacks late on, but

Sagan benefited from the small bunch grouping together in the final kilometre.

Sagan also took over the sprint leader's jersey by two points from Italy's Elia Viviani (Deceuninck-Quick-Step) and Bevin.

Australia's Jason Lea (UniSA-Australia) retained the King of the Mountain jersey after stage three from Italy's Manuel Boaro (Astana Pro Team) and Kazakstan's Artyom Zakharov (Astana).

Spain game: De Minaur-Nadal clash promises 'something special'



Rafael Nadal of Spain shakes hand with Alex De Minaur of Australia after winning the Gentlemen's third round of the Wimbledon Championships

AFP | Melbourne

Half-Spanish Alex de Minaur said it will be special facing "king" Rafael Nadal at the Australian Open today after the 17-time major champion called the teenager "one of the best players in the world".

The 19-year-old Australian number one De Minaur went to primary school in Spain, has a Spanish mother and a Uruguayan father and speaks fluent Spanish.

Expectations are being heaped on the young shoulders of the 27th seed nicknamed "Demon" by a feverish home support.

And pundits such as legend John McEnroe are predicting him as a future multiple major champion.

"Yeah, it's a different po-

sition for me, a position I'm not really used to. It's sort of come out of nowhere," De Minaur said early yesterday morning after a late-night second-round win.

The teenage sensation won the Sydney International warm-up last weekend, beating veteran Andreas Seppi in the final.

He extended his win streak to seven matches by surviving Wednesday night's four-hour marathon against little-known Swiss Henri Laaksonen to set up a blockbuster last-32 clash with Nadal.

"Obviously against Rafa that's going to be something special," said De Minaur, who was sent packing in a straight sets by the Spaniard at the same stage of last year's Wimbledon.

My Bora-Hansgrohe team worked hard to keep me on the front and take care of me. In the end I had a lot of energy for the last lap and it was really under control

PETER SAGAN