

# Pliskova slays Serena

World number one Novak Djokovic eased through to the semi-finals at the Australian Open as Kei Nishikori retired injured

● **Karolina Pliskova's reward for beating Serena Williams is a clash against Japan's Naomi Osaka for a place in the final**

● **Osaka saw off Svitolina in their quarter-final match on day ten**

● **Lucas Pouille tops Milos Raonic to make semis**

AFP | Melbourne



Czech Republic's Karolina Pliskova hits a return against Serena Williams of the US

Serena Williams's bid for a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam title was brought to a halt in sensational style at the Australian Open yesterday by Karolina Pliskova, but fellow former champion Novak Djokovic cruised into the semi-finals.

The American great had beaten world number one Simona Halep in the fourth round but folded against the tall Czech seventh seed, who saved four match points before winning 6-4, 4-6, 7-5 under the hot Melbourne sun.

Her reward is a clash against Japan's Naomi Osaka for a place in the final, after the Japanese fourth seed brutally swatted aside the injured Elina Svitolina 6-4, 6-1.

World number one Djokovic enjoyed an early night when

courageous Kei Nishikori retired with a thigh strain when losing 6-1, 4-1 after going through three five-set epics during the tournament.

It kept the Serb's bid for a record seventh Australian title on track and he will now meet French 28th seed Lucas Pouille, who beat power-serving Canadian Milos Raonic 7-6 (7/4), 6-3, 6-7 (2/7), 6-4 to make his first Slam semi.

It was a gut-wrenching defeat for Williams, who battled back from a set down and was leading 5-1 in the third and serving for the match, only to throw it away with some wild shots as frustrations bubbled to the surface.

"There's nothing I did wrong on those match points. I stayed aggressive. She just literally hit

the lines on some of them," said the dumbfounded 37-year-old, who rolled an ankle but refused to blame it for the defeat.

Since returning last year from giving birth, Williams has made four unsuccessful attempts to match Margaret Court's long-time standing 24 Grand Slam titles, and the wait continues with the French Open in May her next chance.

"The big picture for me is always winning," she added. "I'm not going to sit here and lie about that. It hasn't happened yet, but I feel like it's going to happen."

For Pliskova, it is only her third semi-final at a major. She made the last four at Roland Garros in 2017 and the US Open a year earlier, where she beat Williams before losing the

final to Angelique Kerber.

"I was almost in the locker-room but now I am standing here as a winner. It is a very good feeling," she said after depriving Williams of a US Open final rematch with Osaka.

## Calm Osaka

Asked about facing Osaka next, Pliskova replied: "She's dangerous but nobody is more dangerous than Serena."

A focused Osaka rolled past Ukraine's Svitolina, who was troubled by neck and shoulder problems.

Despite the Ukrainian suffering, it was nevertheless a serious statement from the steely-eyed Osaka, who was playing the sort of tennis which drove her to the US Open title.



**Naomi Osaka became the first Japanese woman in the final four at Melbourne Park since Kimiko Date in 1994**

"I tried to be consistent, it's unfortunate that she got injured but playing against her even when she was injured was still really tough," said the 21-year-old.

"I just had one goal, to try as hard I can and not get angry. I didn't do that really well in the last two rounds and I did that today so I'm really happy with the way I played."

The win ensured she became

the first Japanese woman in the final four since Kimiko Date in 1994.

Djokovic, who is targeting a 15th Grand Slam title, endured his own tough fourth round showdown with Daniil Medvedev and said he was glad to get off court early.

"As they say, this is exactly what the doctor ordered for me after the match two nights ago," he said. "Not to spend too much time on the court."

"I've had plenty of matches so far this year and I am in another semi-final and I will do everything to get ready for that one."

Pouille had never won a match in Melbourne before this year but has recruited 2006 Australian Open champion Amelie Mauresmo to his team and said it was paying off.

"I started a new adventure with my team, with Amelie. I enjoy being on the court again and that is the most important," he said.



Novak Djokovic in action during the match against Kei Nishikori

## Halep's reign as world number one over

AFP | Melbourne

Petra Kvitova's surging win over Ashleigh Barty to make the Australian Open semi-finals ensured Simona Halep's reign as world number one is over, not that the Romanian is bothered.

The Czech star overtook Halep's points total, while Naomi Osaka and Karolina Pliskova also have a mathematical shot at assuming the mantle when the new rankings come out next week.



Simona Halep of Romania walks off court after defeat in her fourth round match against Serena Williams of the United States

Entering the opening Grand Slam of the year, 11 players had a chance to hold the top spot, but that has now been whittled down.

Of the three in the running, only Pliskova has been there before, in 2017 when she became the first Czech woman to do so.

To do so again she must win the title on Saturday.

Halep held the number one ranking for 48 weeks, but after her loss to Serena Williams in round four, she said it wasn't her priority.

"The main goal is just to play as good as I can every match, to win every match I play, so the ranking doesn't really matter," she said.

"End of the year is more important, the ranking, so I will not stress myself about this."

Halep also suggested there was a difference between being the world number one and the best player in the world, given Williams was only seeded 16 at Melbourne Park.

"In my opinion, to be No. 1 in the world and to be the best player in the world, it's a little bit different," she said.

"For sure she (Williams) is the best player in the world because she won so many Grand Slams. She's been number one a lot. I cannot compare my results to her."

## Serena hails Pliskova's 'crazy' comeback

AFP | Melbourne

Serena Williams denied choking after falling victim to one of the greatest ever comebacks yesterday, saying she was powerless as Czech foe Karolina Pliskova "just went crazy" and stormed into the Australian Open semi-finals.

"She just played lights out on match point, literally hitting lines," Williams said. "Just went for it, just went crazy on match point. She just played unbelievable."

The 37-year-old made a slow start and conceded the first set but had recovered and looked set for a hard-fought win before a desperate Pliskova went on the six-game rampage.

"She was killing me... I was almost in the locker room, now I'm standing here as the winner. It's a great feeling," an exhausted Pliskova said after the two hour 10 minute epic.

"My mind was in the locker room. I wasn't playing very well in the third set but I thought



**She just played lights out on match point, literally hitting lines. Just went for it, just went crazy on match point. She just played unbelievable**

SERENA WILLIAMS



Serena Williams of the US reacts after a point against Czech Republic's Karolina Pliskova

let's try, this game (will make it) 5-2. She got a little bit shaky in the end so I took my chances and I won."

Pliskova, who will play Japan's Naomi Osaka in the semis, was on the brink until Williams double faulted with the end in sight after appearing to roll her ankle.

Williams, a seven-time Australian champion, then failed to win a point on serve for the rest of the match.

She refused to blame the injury for the loss, saying her ankle "seems to be fine".

The elated Czech rated it the

best comeback of her life and said she always believed she could beat the American legend.

"I know she's the greatest ever, but I don't want to put her somewhere where I would not have a chance to beat her," she said in explaining how she approached the match.

"I beat her before. She was No.1 at that time. I knew I'm going to have my chances. But I had to play well."

Williams said there was nothing she could do against an opponent in such form.

"I can't say that I choked on those match points, said the

American, who made a comeback last year after having a baby. "She literally played her best tennis ever on those shots."

Williams, seeded 16, had blazed through the early stages of the tournament, seeing off world number one Simona Halep in the fourth round.

But against Pliskova she lacked the intensity she had previously displayed and was soon trailing for the first time during her campaign after a slew of uncharacteristic errors.

The American said it was a lesson to not take anything for granted on match point.