

# Djokovic wary of semi-final underdog in quest for 22nd Slam title

Novak Djokovic targets 10th Australian Open final, Tommy Paul looks to flip the script

TDI | Manama

Novak Djokovic has won all nine of his Australian Open semi-finals and is not ready to let Tommy Paul ruin his unblemished record today as he closes in on a 22nd Grand Slam crown.

The Serb, who won his first Slam at Melbourne Park in 2008, struggled physically in the early rounds this year with a hamstring injury.

But straight-sets thrashings of Alex de Minaur and Andrey Rublev for the loss of just 12 games ominously signalled that the favourite is back to his best for the semi-finals.

Should he beat the unseeded American Paul on Rod Laver Arena, he will face either third seed Stefanos Tsitsipas or Russian 18th seed Karen Khachanov as a final roadblock to a 10th Australian Open title on Sunday.

Djokovic has extra motivation to go all the way and equal Rafael Nadal's 22nd Grand Slam crowns after missing last year's event when he was deported over his Covid vaccination stance. In his absence the Spanish great won.

"I always try to give my best, particularly in Grand Slams,



Novak Djokovic in action during his quarter final match against Andrey Rublev

because at this stage of my career those are the tournaments that count the most," said the 35-year-old.

"But you could say that there is something extra this year. You could say because, yeah, the injury, what happened last year, I just wanted to really do well.

"So far I have a perfect score in Australian hard courts, in Adelaide (which he won) and here. I've been playing better and better. I couldn't ask for a better situation to be in at the moment."

With Djokovic on a 26-match win streak at the Australian Open -- equalling Andre Agassi's Open-era record at the first Grand Slam of the year -- the 35th-ranked Paul is a heavy underdog.

The 25-year-old is a surprise semi-finalist, making this far at a major for the first time on the 14th attempt.

"We never played a match against each other. Obviously he's pretty comfortable here in Australia," Paul said.

"It's going to be a challenging

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NOVAK DJOKOVIC

match, but I'm playing some of my best tennis, so it's a good time."

Djokovic said he had been monitoring the American and would not underestimate the challenge.

"He's been playing probably the tennis of his life," he said. "Very explosive, very dynamic player. I think he can hit all the spots with the serve. Very complete player.

"First semi-finals for him, so

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since Djokovic won the title in 2011 aged 23.

"I'm feeling great with my tennis. I don't think I felt so good in a long time," the Greek said.

"I've said it -- I'm a different player (from the past), playing different. My mentality is different."

He has won all five previous encounters with Khachanov, most recently at the Rome Masters last year, and said he was eager to face the Russian again.

"It's a match that I'm looking forward to," he said. "I'm looking ahead for more, for better. Looking to create some magical experiences here in Australia."

The 26-year-old Russian also made the semi-finals at September's US Open.

He has now made the quarters or better at all four Grand Slams and will draw on the experience when he plays the Greek star.

"I think the first semi-finals, which I did in US Open, that gave me an extra boost and extra confidence to show where I really am, and what I can do when I'm at my best," he said.

"I think all those things together, they push me to where I am right now."

## Returning Archer wants to rediscover 2019 Ashes, World Cup form

Reuters | London

Jofra Archer rates himself "about 80%" fit ahead of his long-awaited England return but the fast bowler is determined to get himself back in the kind of shape that saw him play a starring role in the 2019 Ashes and Cricket World Cup.

Archer spearheaded England's 50-overs World Cup success on home soil that year, bowling the super over that helped them lift the trophy, and took 22 wickets in the Ashes series against Australia.

Elbow and back injuries disrupted his career over the last two years and the 27-year-old



England's Jofra Archer in action during a match (file photo)

only made his competitive return earlier this month in South Africa's Twenty20 league, impressing with eight wickets in five matches.

Archer is set to make his first England appearance since March 2021 in the three-match ODI series against South Africa, which starts in Bloemfontein today.

With an Ashes series and World Cup looming this year, he is keen to pick up where he left off.

"Hopefully it can be a repeat of 2019," Archer said. "We've got a 50-over World Cup again

and an Ashes in the same year so more of the same, please.

"I need to spend the next two, three, four months fine-tuning the body and making myself a bit more resilient. Let me sort that out first and then I can look forward to holding the red ball in my hand again.

"I know whenever I'm fully fit, I don't think there's much that can stop me, it's just a matter of when that was going to be."

A fit and in-form Archer would be a major boost for England's World Cup title defence as well as their bid to win the

YOU KNOW WHAT

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Ashes for the first time since 2015.

"It is an exciting prospect to think about playing with the guys again, especially with the brand of cricket they are playing, which is very exciting," Archer added.

"I might have to do some extra bowling during the weeks when I'm in India (for the Indian Premier League). But that is absolutely fine because I want to play in the Ashes, so I'm going to have to do all the hard yards to tick those boxes."

## English clubs surpass \$2bln transfer spend for first time in 2022

Reuters | London

English soccer clubs spent over \$2 billion on new signings in 2022 for the first time, FIFA's Global Transfer Report revealed yesterday, with the number of international transfers of male and female players reaching record numbers.

There were 20,209 international transfers in men's professional soccer in 2022, representing an increase of 11.6% compared to 2021 and even exceeding the levels of 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of the 2,843 transfers that included fees, the top 100 were responsible for almost 50% of all money spent, with English clubs again topping the list. For the first time, their total outlay exceeded \$2 billion, reaching a record high of almost \$2.2 billion.

"The two-year negative trend in clubs' spending on transfer fees was turned around in 2022, with last year's total outlay reaching \$6.5bn, an increase of 33.5% compared to 2021, yet still below the all-time high of 2019," Emilio Garcia Silvero, FIFA's Chief Legal and Compliance officer, said.

Women's professional football continued to grow in 2022. The number of international transfers last year was almost double the figure of 2018.

In 2022, the number of clubs involved in international transfers went up from 410 in 2021 to 500 last year, a 22% increase," Silvero said.

"All of this reflects the impressive strides being taken as more and more female players



General view outside Manchester City's Etihad Stadium

BETTER YOU KNOW

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continue to turn professional. Some 1,555 international transfers were recorded in 2022, an increase of 19.3% compared to the previous year, while a new high of 119 associations were involved in international transfers."

## Djokovic's father seen posing with fans carrying Russia flags

AFP | Melbourne

Australian Open organisers have issued a reminder to players and their entourages about their policy on "inappropriate flags" after a video emerged showing Novak Djokovic's father posing for pictures with fans holding Russian flags.

Four fans with "inappropriate



Novak Djokovic's father Srdjan

flags and symbols" were questioned by Victoria Police following Wednesday's quarter-final between Djokovic and Russia's Andrey Rublev.

A video also posted on social media showed one supporter on the steps of Rod Laver Arena holding up a Russian flag with the image of President Vladimir Putin on it.

Late on Wednesday another video showed Djokovic's father Srdjan posing for pictures with fans holding Russian flags.

"Players and their teams have been briefed and reminded of the event policy regarding flags and symbols and to avoid any situation that has the potential to disrupt," Tennis Australia said in a statement yesterday.