

Sabalenka, Sinner keep 'Sunshine Double' in sight with Miami wins

Sinner cruises into semis as Sabalenka-Gauff final headlines Miami Open

● Sabalenka beats Rybakina in straight sets

● Gauff crushes Muchova

● Sinner cruises past Tiafoe easily

● Zverev sets up Sinner clash

AFP | Miami

World number one and defending champion Aryna Sabalenka subdued second-ranked rival Elena Rybakina 6-4, 6-3 on Thursday to book a Miami Open title clash with American Coco Gauff.

Sabalenka, who fell to Rybakina in the Australian Open final before turning the tables on the Kazakh in the Indian Wells title match this earlier this month, broke the big-serving Rybakina twice in each set to come out on top in the blockbuster semi-final and keep her bid for the "Sunshine Double" of Indian Wells and Miami on track.

Men's world number two Jan-nik Sinner, who like Sabalenka lifted his first Indian Wells title two weeks ago, also advanced, dominating American Frances Tiafoe 6-2, 6-2 to reach the men's semi-finals.

Their victories mean both the ATP and WTA could see a "Sunshine Double" in the same year for the first time since Novak Djokovic and Victoria Azarenka swept the two prestigious hardcourt tournaments back in 2016.

Sabalenka, who had to save a match point in overcoming Rybakina in the Indian Wells final, applied ruthless pressure on Rybakina's serve while delivering a sterling service performance



Aryna Sabalenka returns serves to Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan



Jan-nik Sinner of Italy returns a shot against Frances Tiafoe of the United States

that featured nine aces -- including four in a row across the seventh and ninth games of the opening set.

"I think I did everything right," the Belarusian said.

Sabalenka seized the first break for a 3-1 lead in the opening. Rybakina broke back, but Sabalenka broke again to pocket the set and took control in the second with a break for 2-0 in a game which Rybakina led 40-0.

Trailing 0-4, Rybakina clawed back a break for 4-1 but Sabalenka wouldn't flinch again. Rybakina saved one match point on her own serve before Sabalenka served it out with a love game punctuated by a fierce forehand winner.

It was just one of the com-

30
consecutive sets at ATP Masters 1000 level have now gone Sinner's way, as he has not dropped a set in the category since last October in Shanghai

manding victories at Hard Rock Stadium, home of the NFL's Miami Dolphins, on Thursday.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Sinner needed just 71 minutes to dispatch Tiafoe and set up a semi-final meeting with fourth-ranked German Alexander Zverev -- who swept past 19th-ranked Argentinian Fran-

cisco Cerundolo 6-1, 6-2 in just 65 minutes.

Fourth-ranked Gauff, who had needed three sets in each of her prior four matches, overwhelmed Czech Karolina Muchova 6-1, 6-1 to secure her place in Saturday's women's final.

'Good serving day'

Gauff surrendered a break on a double fault in the opening game against Muchova then won the next 10 games.

She broke Muchova again to finish the match after 89 minutes, booking her final berth less than three weeks after she retired from her third-round match at Indian Wells with a nerve issue affecting her left arm.

"I think I feel the improve-



Gauff rebounded from an early break to win 10 straight games in a stunning semi-final display

ments are happening -- especially with my forehand -- I was happy with how it's been this whole tournament," Gauff said.

Sinner stretched his ATP Masters 1000 set win streak to 30, having not dropped a set at the level since last October in Shang-

hai.

He broke Tiafoe to open the match, and was off and running, dropping just nine points on his serve in the match.

Sinner, the 2024 Miami champion, fired 14 aces and 33 winners in all against 15 unforced errors.

"It was a good serving day for sure," said Sinner, who is vying to become the first man to win both Indian Wells and Miami in the same year since Roger Federer in 2017.

He'll face a familiar semi-final foe in Zverev, having beaten the German in straight sets in the same round at Indian Wells.

"Tomorrow will be the toughest test," Zverev acknowledged. "I'm looking forward to it."

China give World Cup-bound Curacao wake-up call with 2-0 defeat

AFP | Beijing

Physical China beat World Cup-bound Curacao 2-0 yesterday in the Caribbean island nation's first match under new Dutch coach Fred Ruten after the abrupt departure of veteran Dick Advocaat.

Wei Shihao and Zhang Yuning scored either side of the break at Sydney's Stadium Australia in a wake-up call for the tiny country ahead of its debut appearance at the global showpiece in North America in June-July.

Curacao, with a population of just 156,000, is the smallest nation ever to make a World Cup.

Despite this they came through CONCACAF qualifying unbeaten under Dutchman Advocaat with three wins and three draws and the experi-



China's Wei Shihao (C) celebrates after scoring against Curacao

enced 78-year-old was expected to be at the helm when they create football history.

But he unexpectedly left last month to care for his ill daughter and was replaced by Ruten.

It proved to be a losing start for the former FC Twente, PSV Eindhoven, Feyenoord and Schalke coach, whose side are in a challenging Group E at the World Cup alongside Germany, Ivory Coast and Ecuador.

China, who failed to qualify for the World Cup, dominated the early exchanges in the friendly match that is part of the FIFA Series 2026.

But it was Curacao who had the first sniff of goal with former Birmingham City midfielder Juninho Bacuna's long-range strike narrowly missing the upright.

China, ranked 93 to Curacao's 81, had to wait until the 40th minute for their first clear chance when Wang Shangyuan blazed over the bar.

Ex-England manager Hodgson, 78, returns as Bristol City boss

AFP | London

Former England manager Roy Hodgson will take charge of Championship side Bristol City until the end of the season, 44 years after he last managed the Robins.

Hodgson, 78, replaces Gerhard Struber, who left the club yesterday after a six-game winless run realistically ended hopes of making the play-offs for promotion to the Premier League.

"I have had great conversations with the board and I am really excited by the opportunity to help until the end of the season," said Hodgson, who will face Sheffield United in his first game on Friday.

With City 16th in the table



Roy Hodgson

and unlikely to be dragged into a relegation battle, chief executive Charlie Boss said Hodgson's appointment was designed to set "standards and values" going forward.

"Roy's appointment is about more than the results of the next seven games," said Boss.