Power and glory as Rybakina eyes Wimbledon final

AFP- Elena Rybakina can move closer to a second Wimbledon title on Thursday when she faces Barbora Krejcikova armed with one of the All England Club’s deadliest serves.
Krejcikova is in her first Wimbledon semi-final as are Jasmine Paoloni and Donna Vekic, who contest Thursday’s other tie.

AFP Sport looks at the two semi-finals.

Rybakina aims for repeat success

Elena Rybakina, the 2022 champion, is the overwhelming favourite to sweep to a second title at the All England Club.

The Russian-born Kazakh, seeded fourth, has hit a joint tournament best of 31 aces and has dropped serve just six times.

The 1.83 metre (6 feet) Rybakina has launched 134 winners and spent only six hours and 14 minutes on court through five rounds.

“Of course I have such amazing memories from 2022 and I’m just enjoying every time I step on the court, especially when I play good. It’s just really amazing,” she said.

Krejcikova, the French Open champion in 2021, has spent more than three hours more on court than Rybakina in getting to her first Wimbledon semi-final.

The 28-year-old played the longest women’s match of the tournament in the first round, three hours and 14 minutes, to see off Veronika Kudermetova.

Such resilience would have been difficult to imagine earlier this year, when Krejcikova was laid low by injury an illness.

She also went winless between February and June.

“It was a very, very difficult period,” said the Czech 31st seed.

Paolini, Vekic break new ground

Before this season, Paolini appeared destined to spend her career on the fringes of the women’s game, a top-30 player making a comfortable living but short of stardom.

In 16 appearances at the Grand Slams she had failed to get past the second round.

However, that changed with a fourth-round run at the Australian Open, a first WTA 1,000-level title in Dubai and a runner-up spot at the French Open.

Now the 28-year-old, who stands at a modest 1.63 metres, is in the semi-finals of Wimbledon, having never won a grass-court match until last month.

“I didn’t realise before, but my coach was telling me that I could play well here. I wasn’t believing too much,” said the modest seventh-ranked Italian.

Paolini has thrived in her return game at Wimbledon, breaking serve 28 times.

However, that skill could be tested against Vekic, who has hit 28 aces through five rounds.

The 28-year-old Vekic is in her first Grand Slam semi-final in her 43rd attempt.

Vekic has plenty of experience on her coaching staff in the shape of Pam Shriver, a three-time semi-finalist in the 1980s.

“She has all the experience, so she can help me in some crucial moments. She’s great fun. I’m really proud to have her in my team,” said the Croatian.

AFP