

Sinner faces Zverev test in 'perfect' Australian Open final

AFP- Jannik Sinner is wary of "physical beast" Alexander Zverev as the Italian bids to join an elite group with back-to-back Australian Open titles in a final Sunday that pits the world's top two players.

The ice-cool runaway world number one goes into the Melbourne Park decider on a 20-match win streak, dropping just two sets in his six matches so far.

The final starts at 7:30pm (0830 GMT).

Sinner is favourite to secure a third Grand Slam crown and second at the Australian Open after his maiden triumph over Daniil Medvedev last year.

Only three other men have managed the feat on Rod Laver Arena since the turn of the century – Andre Agassi, Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic.

But the 23-year-old, who suffered from cramp in his semi-final with Ben Shelton, offered Germany's Zverev a glimmer of hope ahead of their showdown.

"No," he replied when asked if he had become unbeatable after his run in Melbourne, on the back of winning eight titles last year, including the US Open and season-ending ATP Finals.

"I know that I put a lot of work in. I know I just try to stay calm, never taking things for granted. Just well-prepared, to be honest.

"Every day is a big challenge. Every day you have a different opponent," he added.

“Sometimes you have some issues and then trying to understand that whatever works best for that day and trying to go for it. Everyone makes mistakes. Nobody’s perfect.”

That will prick the ears of world number two Zverev, long seen as the sport’s most unfulfilled talent, without a Grand Slam title after a decade of trying.

The German has bulked up in recent months and is also on a red-hot streak, winning 16 of his past 17 matches dating back to his title run at November’s Paris Masters.

He holds a 4-2 record over the Italian, but the 27-year-old knows all too well that’s he’s fallen short when it’s mattered most on tennis’s biggest stages.

Zverev blew a two-set advantage against Dominic Thiem in the 2020 US Open final and gave up a 2-1 lead in the French Open title match against Carlos Alcaraz last year.

Despite a decade of trying they remain his Grand Slam highlights.

– ‘Tough battle’ –

After the French Open disappointment, he reunited with revered trainer Jez Green and has been focused on reaching peak fitness to be able to take on players like Sinner and Alcaraz.

“I think I said it also after the French Open final, I got tired against Carlos. I simply got tired in the fourth and fifth set,” he said.

“Yes, there was some unlucky moments. In general, I got tired, and I didn’t want that to happen this year anymore.

“Look, I think Jannik has been the best player in the world for the past 12 months,” he added. “There’s no doubt about it. Won two Grand Slams, has been very, very stable in those regards.

“I’m sure it’s going to be a tough battle on Sunday.”

Sinner’s coach Darren Cahill said it was no surprise for him to see his young charge back in the final, but they were wary of the threat posed by Zverev’s overarching desire to finally win a Slam.

“He’s a physical beast,” Cahill said. “He’s put those years of work into his body. He is a great athlete and has a great five-set record.

“They’re both physically prepared. They’re both incredible athletes,” he added.

“It’s the number one and two in the world so it’s the perfect final as far as the rankings are concerned.”

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