

Nadal to bid Roland Garros farewell, Sabalenka starts title bid

AFP:: Roland Garros will pay tribute to its greatest champion with a ceremony for the retired Rafael Nadal on Sunday, while Aryna Sabalenka gets her French Open campaign up and running on the opening day of the tournament.

Nadal, the record 14-time champion on the Paris clay, retired from tennis last November after an illustrious career.

He returns to Court Philippe Chatrier a year after suffering a first-round exit at the hands of Alexander Zverev in what proved to be his final French Open.

The Spaniard finished with a remarkable 112-4 win-loss record at Roland Garros, dominating the tournament since winning the title on his debut in 2005.

Nadal hung up his racquet following the 2024 Davis Cup Finals in Malaga, initially denying him an opportunity to wave goodbye to his adoring fans in Paris.

His tally of 14 victories at a single Grand Slam appears unlikely to be beaten, with Margaret Court's 11 Australian Open titles second on the all-time list.

Former rivals Roger Federer and Andy Murray are expected to attend Nadal's ceremony, as well as Novak Djokovic – fresh off his 100th ATP title in Geneva.

Nadal's heir apparent Carlos Alcaraz will start his title defence next week as a slight favourite to become the first man to lift the Coupe des Mousquetaires since his compatriot's retirement.

Victory over world number one Jannik Sinner in last weekend's Italian Open final gave Alcaraz the second seeding for Roland Garros.

That raises the possibility of the world's top two players meeting in a Grand Slam final for the very first time on June 8.

"I think for the people, for the tennis fans, I think it's great to have a match-up from some players that make them excited about watching that match," Alcaraz told his pre-tournament press conference of his budding rivalry with Sinner.

"I think for the people and probably the people who don't like watching tennis, I think (our rivalry) is something that because of that (they have) started to watch tennis."

Djokovic will launch his sixth bid for a record-breaking 25th Grand Slam triumph against American Mackenzie McDonald on Tuesday.

The 38-year-old became just the third man to reach a century of tournament victories, after Jimmy Connors and Federer, by defeating Hubert Hurkacz in a three-hour epic in Switzerland on Saturday.

But questions remain about Djokovic's form after losing in his opening matches in both Monte Carlo and Madrid to Alejandro Tabilo and Matteo Arnaldi respectively.

The Serb faces a difficult draw, with last year's runner-up Zverev a potential quarter-final opponent and Sinner possibly waiting in the last four.

– Sabalenka eyeing first French Open –

Women's world number one Sabalenka headlines the opening-day action with her first-round match against 75th-ranked Russian Kamilla Rakhimova.

The Belarusian will kick off the schedule on Court Philippe Chatrier as she looks to make a strong start to her tilt at a first French Open title.

Sabalenka has never reached the final at Roland Garros, but the tournament appears more open than in recent years given the struggles of three-time defending champion Iga Swiatek.

The Pole has slipped to fifth in the rankings and has not reached a WTA final since lifting her fourth French Open trophy last year.

Sabalenka believes she is as well-placed as ever to take advantage.

“Throughout the years I’ve improved a lot (on clay) and today I feel physically, mentally... my game is pretty much ready to play on clay. Yeah, I definitely feel stronger than ever,” said Sabalenka, who won the Madrid Open earlier this month.

Elina Svitolina, a four-time quarter-finalist in Paris, opened the action under the roof on Court Suzanne Lenglen against Turkey’s Zeynep Sonmez as play began on Sunday in drizzly conditions.

Italian Open champion Jasmine Paolini, who was well beaten by Swiatek in the 2024 final, plays Yuan Yue.

Chinese star Zheng Qinwen and rising Russian star Diana Shnaider are among the other women’s hopefuls on court.

Men’s eighth seed Lorenzo Musetti, who has reached at least the semi-finals at all three clay-court Masters events this year, faces German Yannick Hanfmann.

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