

Western & Southern Open

Wednesday, August 16, 2023

Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

Novak Djokovic

Press Conference



N. DJOKOVIC/A. Davidovich Fokina

6-4, [Ret.]

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. It's never fun to not get your whole match in. You get rest versus being battle-tested. How do you balance that tonight?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Yeah, as you say, it's kind of mixed emotions tonight. You know, I really like Alejandro. We get along really well off the court. We train a lot with each other in Spain.

He had a terrific week last week. Played semifinals. Played a lot of matches. Played yesterday. He told me at the net it was a lower back issue that appeared yesterday. So I think the amount of matches he's played maybe in the last 10 days has taken the toll on his body.

It's unfortunate. I really hope he can recover and play well in New York. As far as I'm concerned, obviously, you know, playing one set is better than not playing or, you know, losing, I guess (smiling).

So I get another chance tomorrow. Kind of shaking off the rust tonight. I feel, you know, I can always play better. Hopefully as the tournament progresses I'll raise my game.

Q. Tennis has become more and more late nights, playing at 1:00, 2:00, 3:00 a.m. Curious what you make of that. How do you prepare for the possibility of...

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Yeah, well, I had some throughout my career, very late finishes. It doesn't happen regularly, let's say. It happens every once in a while. You know, I guess more tournaments are introducing the night sessions that maybe have not had them before.

I guess the tournaments are normally, you know, looking to get more profit by selling the day-session and night-session tickets. I think earlier in my career it wasn't the case. It was more of a one whole session.

Nowadays you have, normally when the day session ends, they empty the stadium, particularly the big stadiums, bringing on the people for the night session. That takes time.

Whether that's good for players, maybe not ideal, but at the same time, you have to find balance between satisfying the fans. You know, tournaments are looking to obviously gain more profit and more revenue out of it.

Then the night sessions are normally the ones that are more entertaining. You know, people get into it. Grand Slams normally have, like, US Open night sessions are probably the most famous night sessions in our sport. There is also something about it that gets you going.

But I understand that if you have kind of a consistent late-night finishes and continuously find yourself in that situation that it's not good, because it's hard, you know, to wait the entire day. You know, if you wake up earlier, then it's quite a lot of hours to kill, so to say, before getting out on the court.

Yeah, it's a bit challenging for players. I understand that. But again, I think one of the main reasons why we have late-night finishes is because there is a gap now between day session, night session, because of the reasons I stated, I think.

Q. Can you just talk about the general feeling of playing a first singles match in the United States since 2021 and first Western & Southern singles match since 2020.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Yeah, the Western & Southern Cincinnati Open in 2020 was played in New York, actually, because of the bubble. So I haven't played here since 2019.

Time flies. You know, four years seems like it was yesterday. So it's definitely nice to be back. You know, I have had some really nice memories from this tournament.

Winning it in 2018 obviously is a highlight for me, because it was the only Masters I haven't won for years. You know, I think I lost four or five finals mostly to Roger.



But I did play well in the past, and, you know, was really glad to have a chance to come back to States. It's been two years. I missed it. Some of the biggest tournaments in our sport are played on American soil. I'm just excited to play some tennis.

Q. Welcome back.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Thank you.

Q. It hasn't only been a long time since you played in the United States but kind of a long time since you played on hard court also. Last one may be February. How do you feel form-wise? How would you rate your game?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Well, difficult to rate, in a way, based on one set, you know, relatively short set. There was not many exchanges from baseline, you know, mostly dominated by, you know, the serve games. I did make couple of breaks. I lost the serve once.

Yeah, some positives, some negatives. But in the end of the day, it's kind of expected. First match coming back. It will probably take a few sets for me to really get things going in a right way.

Honestly, I mean, I was very surprised with how quick it is and how much ball actually flies through the air. Balls are very bouncy here, very alive.

You know, it wasn't like that during the practice days during the day. So maybe, I don't know, something, whether it's a nice session that affects it in a certain way or whatever, but, you know, it's also quite difficult to control the ball here, I think, in center court. I don't know how it is on the other match courts.

So it probably, yeah, I guess, as the tournament progresses, the player feels more comfortable. Hopefully, yeah, I'll get, yeah, I'm getting another chance obviously tomorrow against Gael, who I have to say a few nice things about him. It's great to see him play on a high level again after struggling with his injuries for a few years. We cannot forget that he's older than me, because everyone talks about my age. (Laughter.)

I think it's worth saying that he's one year older. It's going to be a dual of veterans tomorrow, so it's going to be quite interesting to see that.

But no, I mean, he's a fantastic guy. He brings so much entertainment, charisma to the tour, and, you know, fans love him. Players love him. It's great to see him playing so

well.

Q. In the last 24 hours, several past champions have been eliminated from this tournament. Can you talk about how difficult it is to win tournaments, the same event, in back-to-back years? How difficult it is to win back-to-back tournaments?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Yeah, there is that element of defending champion, defending 1000 points in this case. It's a big obstacle, in a way. It's a big challenge. You know, sometimes you use it as a fuel, and it gives you more motivation.

Sometimes it can also really wear you down and make you feel that you have too much weight on your shoulders. So for someone like Borna, he lost today and he won the tournament last year. Obviously, I'm sure that he would agree, that it's easier to find yourself in a position to, you know, go for a trophy, for a tournament, without having this role of defending it. You know what I mean?

It's kind of also a mind game. I really, throughout my career, particularly in the second part of my career, didn't really allow myself nor the people or the media when I would talk to them, I would not really allow myself to think that I'm a defending champion but to put myself really in a position that I'm equal as everyone else, so I have the same starting point. So I start from scratch every year. You know, play that tournament like I played it the first time.

I guess it really just depends on the player, but it is, yeah, not an easy situation to find yourself in. Normally for players who haven't had too many wins on that level, it's something new. It's a feeling that can really create that sensation of big pressure.

Q. You were talking about Gael, and I know what the head-to-head is, of course, but obviously...

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: I think he knows it too. (Laughter.) Hopefully that doesn't change tomorrow.

Q. He has the passion but he also has many skills that he brings to the court. From your experience, what's the most difficult part for you?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: When it comes to his game? Well, his athleticism is off the charts. I mean, there are not too many players that can slide the way he does. You know, he's got the very good genes, obviously, the way he's super strong, super elastic, dynamic. He's an all-around player. He's so talented.

I remember, you know, he's a year older than me, again, I remember back in the junior days I played him in some junior tournaments and also in a futures level, actually. I still remember that very well. It's one of my first Tier 1 professional matches. I qualified for the futures.

It was in Italy, and we played a very late-night match in a bubble on clay in one of those country clubs. It's funny, we go back a very, very long time. Have always admired his athleticism. I think it's phenomenal to watch, for fans, I mean, obviously seeing someone, you know, having fun and entertaining crowds and everyone, it's something that is really good for our sport.

Yeah, so he's super-dangerous player, because he can play equally well in offense and in defense. Sometimes you have a feeling you can't get ball past him.

So, yeah, and big serve. Obviously he's been winning some big matches last couple weeks. Yeah, hopefully he's not going to win any more this week. (Laughter.)

FastScripts by ASAP Sports