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Novak Djokovic

Press Conference



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THE MODERATOR: Novak, welcome back to Rome. How much do you know about your opponent tomorrow, Etcheverry? He's posted a few things about catching up in the rankings.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Great to be here in Rome. Thank you.

I don't know much about him. I've watched him play several times. I've seen also his posts decreasing the deficit in the points between us.

I wish him all the best. He seems like a very nice guy, coming from a country that has lots of tennis success. He looks like a very hard worker, fighter on the court.

I wish him all the best except tomorrow night (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. How are you feeling physically? Is it the right elbow that kept you out of Madrid? Is it still bothering you? Somebody said it was a thing during training the other day.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: No, no, it's all good. It's all good. I mean, there's always some things here and there that bother you on this level. It's normal. Also when you're not 25 any more, I guess you experience that a bit more than what used to be the case (smiling). It takes a little bit more time I guess to recover.

But I feel good. I miss competition. I love playing in Rome. Historically throughout my career, Rome has always been a very nice tournament for me, had plenty of success, won it many times. Played also quite a few times in finals. My most successful clay court event and the biggest one coming into French Open.

Hopefully it can serve, again, as a great, great springboard for me to what's coming up in Paris where I want to play my best.

Q. This is the first tournament you and Carlos have been in this year together. What has it been like

almost having a long distance rivalry, you've traded No. 1s, you've dominated your opponents?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Sounds romantic (smiling).

Q. You haven't played each other in over a year.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Yeah, it is strange that we haven't been in the same draw since the beginning of the season. Due to the circumstances on both sides, that didn't happen.

I mean, he's going to be No. 1 after this tournament whatever happens. Deservedly so. He's been playing some very impressive tennis, a great level. He's the player to beat on this surface, no doubt.

Of course, it depends if Nadal is going to play in French Open or not. But Alcaraz is one of the top favorites without any dilemma. He's been playing fantastic tennis.

We faced each other only once last year in Madrid. If we get a chance to face each other here, would be in finals. I think we would both love to play in the finals.

Let's see. It's a long tournament. There's a lot of great players. It's a buildup for me and for him coming into this tournament and also French Open.

Yeah, that's all I can say on the distance relationship. I leave the imagination up to you. No comment on that (smiling).

Q. I have a child memory for you. Do you remember the first time you smashed your racquet when you were a child? What did you feel? What happened that day?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Wow, wow. First time I received this kind of question, my friend.

I really have no idea when that happened. Unfortunately for me or for my parents or coaches, it has happened more than few times. I don't recall the first time it happened.

Do you remember that?

Q. Yes.



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NOVAK DJOKOVIC: You remember when I smashed my racquet the first time?

Q. No, when I smashed it.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: When you smashed it. When did you smash your racquet?

Q. I was 12.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: 12, okay. I don't think I was that young, but I can understand you. I empathize with you. We go through same issues (smiling).

There's not much more I can say about that. It happened more than few times. It's not something I'm proud of, obviously, but it happens I guess.

Q. If I can ask you about your old rival Rafa in Paris. What would it mean for the tournament in Paris, what would change if he doesn't show up? If he does come in with little to no match preparation, how challenging is that coming into a Grand Slam in that situation, or in terms of Rafa and his record in Paris, that won't mean anything?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: It won't change anything in relation to my preparation. Obviously I'm looking to be performing the best that I can perform myself. But, of course, the world of tennis and the Roland Garros tournament will be affected by his absence from the tournament because his history in that tournament and generally what he has achieved in his career and the impact he has made on the sport.

Of course, him missing any tournament, but particularly the big ones, has an impact on the tennis world and the tennis fans. So I'm sure that everyone wants to see him there. I would like to see him play because I think for the competition, it is the best if you can have the best players in the world so the challenge is as big as it can be.

I know I've been seeing some videos that he's been training, he's been trying to get himself ready for it. Yeah, let's see. I mean, I'm obviously not in his shoes, not in his skin. I don't know what he's feeling. I'm sure he's trying his best to be there. Let's see what happens.

Q. I did an interview with Rune here. I asked him which one he would pick to go out for dinner between the Fab Four. He choose yourself just to ask you the reason of your difficult and different choices in your life.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Choices, hmmm...

Q. I would like to know from you which is the most difficult choice you did in your life? You did a lot of choices. How tough is it to be an example for your country, for tennis players, for the young people, for everybody?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Well, it's nice to hear from him that he would like to have a dinner with me. I hope he invites me. I still didn't get a question. If I do, I'll gladly accept it.

We've been training quite a few times in the last few years. He's one of the leaders of the future generation of tennis. He knows, I told him whatever he needs, I'm always here. He wants to have a conversation...

I know it's difficult because he's a top-10 player. Of course, as a rival, you maybe don't want to get too close to your biggest rivals.

We are in a different, in a way, position because I've been playing professional tennis for 20 years, he just started. If there is something that he thinks that I can help him with or share something, I'm always open for that, as I always was and always am for all the young players.

There's so many difficult decisions and choices I had to make in my career, in my life. I mean, it's hard to pick one and say, Okay, this is something that has created an incredible transformation in my life.

I think the most important one was to be professional athlete, professional tennis player. At that time when I was really young, a teenager, I didn't know what it means to be a professional tennis player, all the pros and cons.

I was very lucky in my career, in my life, to experience what I have, to be granted by God this opportunity to be able to play so long and be so successful.

It's the sacrifices that you have to make really on a daily basis, that we all have to make. I don't want to sit here and tell you how difficult my life is, because it's not (smiling). People with far more difficult things that they're experiencing in their lives.

I've been blessed, no doubt about it. I think it's important to understand that we all are human beings and we all go through our own difficulties and challenges and obstacles. It's okay not to be okay, as well. I've seen that quote somewhere. I think it's a really simple way of kind of expressing really great wisdom of life.

We all talk today about you got to be so strong, you got to be always at your best. When you go through difficulties, especially as a man, you are going to be judged and

criticized for maybe expressing things that you feel, that you want to share, because you cannot be weak. It's a sign of weakness.

I actually think it's contrary. It's a great feeling of liberation when you cry, when you let things go, when you express your emotions.

I feel that most of the people can actually relate to that because I don't know anybody that is perfect, that is not going through any difficulty in life mentally, emotionally. We all go through that regardless of our profession, the level we are at, the success level, the society roles that we have. There is a lot of labeling, a lot of different things that are happening.

I think it's important to go back to the basics really and understand why you started to do what you do, which for me in this case is tennis and professional sport that I always dreamed of playing.

As a kid, you start playing sport 99% of the time because you fall in love with it, because you have certain emotion that drives you, that makes you joyful, that makes you enjoy every single moment. I think this is something to always go back to really and remind yourself when you are going through difficult times. I think it humbles you, as well.

Then, of course, the hard work, dedication, devotion, discipline, all of those values and virtues that you need to work on daily to kind of make them in a way a conscious presence every single day. Without that, there is absolutely no success.

Q. Why would you say that clay is the surface where you need more time to find your rhythm? Is it more technical or the movement? Is it a bit of everything?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: A bit of everything. It's the movement. Every bounce more or less is different. It's such an irregular bounce surface. You have wind. You have clay, a surface, that is alive basically. Let's call it this way. Like grass in a way.

On clay, if you have a windy day, wind takes out the top layer of the surface, and it affects the bounce, it affects the spin of the ball, the speed of the court. Of course, if it rains or something like this, the conditions are different every single day, then it affects whether the clay is softer or harder.

There's plenty of factors that are in play, and you just have to deal with so much more than other surfaces. That's how I feel. Sometimes it's really overwhelming. It's all about I

guess adjusting to that.

I feel that it takes more practice sessions, more weeks of spending time on the court and working on your shots, working on your tactics, on technique, adaptation to the court than any other surface.

I've been hearing some players say that about grass. For me, I've been fortunate on grass, I adapt really quickly. But clay is something that really demands time for me.

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