

Roland Garros

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Paris, France

Novak Djokovic

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome back to Roland Garros. How is the preparation going, and how much do you know about your first-round opponent?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Thank you. It's great to be here. It's another Grand Slam. Obviously every Grand Slam at this stage of my career is like a present for me, so I'll try to use the opportunity as best as possible. Leading into Roland Garros I haven't had, you know, too much success on clay court events, but, you know, a Grand Slam is like a different sport, to be honest.

I feel always extra motivated and confident in Grand Slams I think because of, you know, the success I have had over the years in these kind of events all over the world, different surfaces. And best-of-five, you know, played every second day. I think it actually serves me well, this kind of format, because it allows me to I think have some time to recover between the matches and slowly build my form.

I mean, obviously, you know, I don't want to talk about the later stages of the tournament and who I might play or face, because it's disrespectful for the other opponents that you will face in the opening round, so I try to focus only on the next challenge. Speaking of which, I'm gonna play against Aleks Kovacevic who is an American player with Serbian background and someone that I trained with a few times in the last few years, and we speak the same language.

You know, I think well of him. You know, he's a very nice guy and very talented, one-handed backhand. Obviously growing up in America he didn't get to play much on clay, but, you know, I cannot underestimate anybody.

Hopefully I can get a good start of the tournament and see how far I can go.

THE MODERATOR: Questions in English.

Q. For the first time in your career, Novak, you have the opportunity to win potentially slam No. 23, which would take you above Rafa. Can you just talk about how excited you are by that challenge and the hard work and the effort you've had to put in to get to this point in your career where you can become the leader in the men's stakes?



ROLAND-GARROS

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Well, it's no secret that one of the main reasons I play today and compete in professional tennis is to try to break more records and make more history in tennis. That's extremely motivating and inspiring for me. But as I said, at the same time, you know, things are different than they were 10 years ago in terms of how my body is maybe responding to the schedule. You know, I'm playing season after season.

So early in the year I was saying that I put emphasis and priority on the Grand Slams, so I'm feeling good at the moment. I don't have any physical issues that worry me. So that's most important for me. You know, I want to feel good coming into a Grand Slam.

I mean, that was the case with Australia this year. To be honest, I played great tennis in Adelaide and had a good lead-up, and then I got injured actually in last few matches in Adelaide lightly and then even more in practice week before Australia. So I had to deal with that have injury throughout the entire tournament which wasn't pleasant. But, you know, I won the tournament so it was amazing to be able to win it this way.

But, you know, hopefully I don't need to deal with something like that. But I have to be ready that eventually things like that might happen nowadays more than that was the case before.

So part of me is, of course, you know, confident and always aspires to win Grand Slams and biggest titles in this sport, but I also have to be humble about the fact that things are a bit different, you know, with the way I'm feeling on the court month after month, you know. The beating is harder than it was before, physically (smiling).

So I'll try to balance things out. I know how to approach the Grand Slam. I know how to live during these few weeks, in a way day in and day out, and I hope that I'll have a few weeks. It would mean that I went far in the tournament. But yeah, I have a very good team of people around me, and so far things have been progressing well in the last week of training.

History being on the line is something that is very flattering and is very motivating, no doubt about it. Obviously Nadal not playing in the tournament here is a big loss for tennis, is a big loss for Roland Garros, because he's by far the most successful player to play in this tournament in the history.



So of course it opens up, you know, a chance and opportunity for the rest of us to try to get a title, because whenever he plays he's an absolute favorite here or any clay court tournament, for that matter.

Yeah, you have big names, of course, like Alcaraz, he's No. 1 in the world, and probably the biggest favorite in the tournament. You know, Tsitsipas and Medvedev, they have started playing great on clay. And Rune, Ruud, Zverev, knows how to play big events, can always do damage against anybody.

So I think the tournament is quite open, to be honest. Maybe a few guys that are at the top of the favorites list, but anyone can take it. I'm hoping it can be me.

Q. Novak, given your own great personal history with Rafa, how much are you personally going to miss having him around the grounds, and especially in the draw?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Well, honestly, I don't miss him being in the draw, you know, (smiling). You know, I don't like seeing him in the draw of Roland Garros, to be honest, you know. I have had not so much success against him in our records head-to-head in Roland Garros.

I have managed to beat him twice, but, you know, I had to leave my heart and my guts out on the court to achieve that. So I know how hard it is to play him anywhere, really, around the world, but especially here.

But, you know, of course as a tennis fan and someone that is also part of the tennis ecosystem, you always want to win, to see the best tennis players in the world, the most famous tennis players in the world playing. So he's definitely one of the guys that not only has made a history in terms of his records in this tournament overall, but just he won the hearts of many tennis fans around the world, and deservedly so, with his charisma and character and everything that he left in his legacy.

Yeah, I mean, a lot of people were debating on how long he's still going to play because of the injuries that he had in the past, you know, what, 10 years. You know, a lot of people retired him already 10 years ago but he kept going, which is something I respect and admire. Because I know how hard it is to maintain that level, you know, and keep going even after having a tough injury and even after going through so much in your career and achieving so much you still have to kind of find that drive.

He's really exemplary player for that. So for sure he will be missed this season, and hopefully can come back. I think he said somewhere around end of the season, last few months of the season, and then he said that next year will be his last.

So, you know, that news came in a way as a shock to everybody, you know. People were asking me how I felt when he said that, you know, and I have to say that, you know, I was saying that always that he's my biggest rival. When he announced that he's going to have his last season of career, you know, I felt part of me is leaving with him too, if you know what I mean.

Maybe I'm not expressing myself well, but because of the rivalry that we had and that we still have, because he's still active player, I feel that he was one of the most, I would say, impactful people that I have ever had in my career, the growth of my career, and me as a player. Definitely a great motivational factor for me to keep playing and keep competing and keep pushing each other, you know, who's gonna achieve more, who's gonna do better.

Yeah, it made me wonder, you know, it made me think about my career and how long I'm going to play. So far I'm not going to make any announcement today, but just reflecting on it, you know, I felt also a little bit emotional about what he was saying.

Q. I'd like to ask you about two young up-and-coming guys whose names you mentioned a moment ago, Carlos Alcaraz and Holger Rune. I wonder if you could tell us what you think about their top qualities and what's most impressed you about what you have seen either on court against them or watching them from afar.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: I have to say, first, because I mentioned some of the names that are in top of the favorites list and I missed Sinner. I'm sorry for that. He's definitely right up there as one of the leaders of the next generation that is coming up. Obviously him included with Rune and Alcaraz that you mentioned.

You know, a lot of people are talking about this new big rivalry between Alcaraz and Sinner because they had some epic matches in the last 12 months. I think it's great that we have new rivalries. We need to have new rivalries, no doubt.

Rune is a player that deserves to be in that mix, you know, that deserves to be mentioned as one of the leaders of the next generation, one of the best players in the world, because his tennis and his quality that he possesses and results that are now better and better, are a testament to how good he is.

I lost both of the matches that we played against each other to him, and to Alcaraz as well, the only one we played against each other. They both impressed me on the court, the way they played, moved on the court, the way they handle pressure as well.

I think these guys are very mature for their age. With Alcaraz, obviously you have Ferrero who is ex-No. 1 of the world, someone who had the reputation of always being very serious, very disciplined, and he went about his business in a proper manner. I think him being with Alcaraz from I think age of 14 or 15 was a fantastic decision for Alcaraz, I mean, and great news, you know, to have somebody who is going to mentor and guide you and introduce you to the professional tennis. So it's obviously working extremely well.

Then Rune, he has Patrick Mouratoglou who is one of the best coaches around and someone who is also very smart, he's had so much success with different players, both on men's and women's tour.

They got good teams. It's always important to have that one person that you can rely on that can really give you an inspiration and motivation, but at the same time, you know, someone who has been in your shoes or someone that can really understand what you're going through. I think that's essential for a young player in order to face adversities and all the challenges that you have on the way.

Q. You have already said that Alcaraz is the biggest favorite here. Can you explain why? Why not, for example, you that are more...

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Because he's No. 1 in the world, and he's a player that won big titles on clay this season. So right now, you know, he is the biggest favorite regardless of the fact that he has, you know, 1 Grand Slam and I have 22. I mean, still, we look at the last few months and the kind of shape and the form that he's having and that I'm having, I think he's a slightly bigger favorite.

But then again, as I said, Grand Slams are a different tournament, a different sport in a way, because you're, you know, playing best-of-five, you are playing in the most important tournaments in the world, and the experience is on my side, but how much will that play a role in eventual head-to-head if I get to play him or not, we'll get to see.

But in terms of looking at it from the perspective of the game itself and the form, I think he's the No. 1 favorite now.

Q. You were saying earlier that ten years ago you may have been doing things a little differently in terms of how you play the sport and how you set yourself up. I just wonder in the context of a Grand Slam tournament, is there more of a premium on you being efficient in the early rounds and being hyper focused not to get involved in a match that will maybe tire you out at the age you are now?

NOVAK DJOKOVIC: Well, I actually said earlier that the things are different in terms of my physical state ten years ago than they were now but not that I would do something differently.

I think obviously there were some big, big matches in my life that I lost that I wish maybe I handled those particular situations a bit differently, that would maybe cause in a different result for me. But I also have won so many matches where I was supposed to lose.

To name a few, Federer, finals against Federer in Wimbledon 2019, statistically I was, you know, I was beaten by him in every stat, and I never broke his serve the entire match, and I still won it, finals of Wimbledon. And, you know, against Rafa in 2012, Australian Open finals, et cetera, et cetera.

So there is always something that you wish you could have done better, but at the end of the day, generally I wouldn't do things differently because I'm very, you know, proud of my career and everything that I have achieved.

But in terms of your question in regards to kind of, I would say, modifying the energy levels, depending on the round that you're playing, I don't know, to be honest. I don't think it's smart, you know, to have this kind of mindset coming into a match.

If you're thinking then, then you're underestimating your opponent, and anything can go bad. Also on a given day, you're not feeling your best, and then maybe opponent in early rounds has nothing to lose and he's extra motivated, playing tennis of his life. Like was the case for example in Rome where Alcaraz lost to Marozsan from Hungary, I never seen him play, most of the people never saw him ever, and then he shows up and plays lights out, you know.

So it can happen, especially if you're a top player and one of the favorites and everyone wants to get a scalp. So I think approaching with a lot of discipline and seriousness and professionalism is probably the best formula and mindset.

And you can't be, I feel like, thinking about the amount of energy that you will spend in the early rounds and how that's gonna affect the later rounds. I don't think that -- it might appear from outside for somebody who is watching the match, but, you know, you actually want to go into fourth, fifth gear right away from the start so you can actually spend as less energy as possible. In this way if you approach it, then fine.

I have had plenty of those Grand Slams like that, you know, where I just pretty much dominate the early rounds and I want to do that, because I don't want to, you know, spend too much energy. I want to be able to showcase

what I'm capable of and then move on to the next one.

So yeah, I guess, I hope that that answers your question.

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