

## **BORIS BECKER**

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Nadal overwhelming favourite for men's, and open season at the women's

The start of the tennis summer for viewers worldwide is at Paris. This year's French Open has an overwhelming favourite in the men's circuit and an even field in the women's. There was some shadow of doubt over clay's all-time great Rafael Nadal when he came to Paris last year to reclaim his territory. The fact that he had been deprived of the title in 2015 and 2016 made one doubt whether he would be able to make it an unbelievable, mind-boggling tenth win.

This time, things are same and yet they are different. The similarity is that Nadal, recently recrowned world No. 1, comes in with a fabulous record on the clay circuit this year. Once again he only lost one match, to Dominic Thiem, and once again he only dropped two sets outside of that one loss. Nadal looks more formidable and really is an overwhelming favourite.

He is looking fit, confident and ready for a remarkable 11th title, even with a couple of former champions lurking in the shadows. Novak Djokovic is back in business, he is looking better and better, and was extremely impressive through the clay season. Stanislas Wawrinka, though, is not the player he was in 2015 and would really need some more time before his knee fully heals.

In fact, the only two players who look in great touch at the moment, in good enough touch to at least win a set off the great Spaniard, are Alexander 'Sascha' Zverev and Thiem. The latter was impressive last year till he was blown away by Nadal in the semi-finals. Zverev looked great in the Rome Masters and is being hailed as a player to look out for, with his great form on clay. I think Nadal was helped just a little by rain in the finals. Zverev is learning from past mistakes and I think these next few months will show that he is a very special player. However, the next year would give us an inkling of whether he has what it takes to win Grand Slams; he seems to have the game and as a fellow German I certainly am excited by his talent.

Looking across at the women's side, the most amazing story is Serena Williams' return to the court barely a year after having her baby. This is testimony to her incredible fitness and talent, and she will definitely be a favourite among crowds. She should have returned with the seeding that she had before she withdrew from the circuit. This was the most natural thing to do on the women's circuit – the officials certainly have not taken a great call here. Serena does have her work cut out for her in the form of top seed Simona Halep, defending champion Jelena Ostapenko, Garbine Muguruza and the ever-dangerous Maria Sharapova.

The field is rather open with any of these women needing just one good fortnight to win the tournament. Ostapenko was unseeded last year and went on to win. Since then she has consolidated her position and has impressed me enough to know that she is not a one tournament wonder. I also hope Halep goes the distance here. She deserves to be a Grand Slam champion and this is her favourite surface. It's open season for the women's side – predictions are hard to make.

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**Top seeds going strong in the women's tournament, no surprises in the men's**

The French Open is a little more magical than other years this time. I have never seen such teeming crowds at Roland Garros and the weather has also been brilliant. Tournament director Guy Forget is particularly pleased because the weather has been great through the day with thunderstorms every evening. Thank God it's not the other way around.

There have not been too many surprises on the men's side. Rafael Nadal had a testing time in the first round but it's been smooth sailing thereafter. He is looking fit and on course to make a strong defence of his title.

I am particularly interested in Sascha Zverev's progress. The young German had two testing matches in the first week and fortunately has a day's break now before his next match. This would be an advantage for him because his opponent has no break thanks to the deferment of his match.

Dominic Thiem is also making steady and focussed progress through the draw. He looks very good for the next week and is still among the top four contenders.

The other player who I am watching keenly is Novak Djokovic. I can see some of the athleticism and groundstrokes that made him the champion just two years ago. I know several experts doubt this hunger and commitment. However, I know the former champion and he would not be back here unless he is hungry for it. He is improving with every game and does not look too far from his best.

Progressing well and below the radar is Juan Martin Del Porto. The Argentine is looking strong and is particularly ominous when the courts are dry.

On the women's side, I am amazed to see that Simona Halep is scheduled to play her next match on Court 18. It's rare to see the top seed being consigned to the outer courts. Simona is a player whose time has come and she is ready for the role of Grand Slam champion.

Elina Svitolina is the other player I was excited by and I was really surprised to see her lose to an unseeded player. Caroline Wozniacki is looking good and seems to have discovered a way to work her game on clay. I reckon this is going to be a good year for her. Maria Sharapova is also looking steady and consistent.

And finally there is Serena Williams. She is in good touch and will get fitter and stronger with every passing game since she has been away from the courts for a fair amount of time. Her next opponent is the German player Julia Goerges.

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### **Women's championship draws towards an unpredictable finish**

The good news from the French Open is that the women's side had a stability and form that ensured the best players made it deep into the tournament without too many upsets. I liked the quality of tennis played through the second week, and the fact that the stars of the draw, ranging from the top seed to other Grand Slam champions, ensured that fans were excited and invested.

Both semi-finals went more or less according to script. The all-American semi-final between Madison Keys and Sloane Stephens was one sided but I thought it was still an important step in the development of Keys. Her strong serving and power-hitting seemed a little too intense against Stephens, who had all the answers on Thursday. Stephens, on the other hand, modified her game beautifully to suit the needs of clay. She was ballerina-like on the court and seemed to be exactly where the ball was without missing a step or even needing to slide. It was a pleasure watching her grace which complemented the heavy hitting of her compatriot. But I expect Keys to do well on the grass circuit, so watch out for her!

The all-European final between Garbine Muguruza and Simona Halep saw the latter come through without much effort. The problem for Muguruza was the one she has often encountered in her career: she does not have a good defence once her attacking game is not working. She is unbeatable when her groundstrokes and serve are working but when they are not, she does not have a B Game. Simona was more assured and looked at ease once again as she used her efficient defence game to nullify Muguruza's groundstrokes.

Looking ahead at Saturday's final, other than the Americans in the house, the crowd is going to overwhelmingly support Halep. She was so close to the championship here last year and has made it to other finals as well. Both the top seed and Stephens have similar games in that they have excellent footwork and also a strong defence game.

Notably, Stephens has never lost a final and that's some record! Stephens was always a player to watch out for as she came through the junior circuit and now looks like she has come into her own. I am not one to sit on the fence and, though Halep is the favourite, Stephens' finals record makes me reluctant to predict the champion. (Gameplan)

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**I will Nadal to win, even at 75 percent!**

The men's final echoes what happened in Madrid with the greatest phenomenon on clay taking on the only player to have beaten him on that surface this year.

If Rafael Nadal wins the French for the eleventh time it would be facile to call it an achievement, this is history, perhaps fantasy and definitely never to be repeated ever again - not on clay, not in any other Grand Slam.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves since there is a final to be played on Sunday and Dominic Thiem has done enough in the last couple of years to establish himself as an accomplished clay court player. The Austrian looked very assured against Alexander Zverev as well as Cecchinato. The quarterfinal between Zverev and Thiem foretells the future as I see both these players as future champions.

The three five-setters that Zverev played before reaching the last eight made the young German run out of gas when he went up against Thiem. However, full marks to Thiem for finishing the match in clinical style and making the semi-finals once again. He was equally assured against Cecchinato and the big plus is that he has not been tired out by long matches before what will be the toughest challenge of his career.

Nadal is still playing at only seventy-five per cent efficiency and that still is good enough for him to beat tough opponents like Juan Martin Del Potro. There were moments against Diego Schwartzman where unforced errors did creep in but he managed to find a way back.

So what would Thiem have to do to beat this colossus of clay? He would simply have to remember what worked for him in Madrid this year and try to replicate it. If Nadal gives him opportunities he should be confident enough to go for the kill. There will be moments when Nadal's serve wavers and Thiem should be brave enough to go for his shots. Del Potro did have those moments in the semi-finals but he was not able to make the most of them.

However, there is no denying that Nadal, on clay at Roland Garros, on Centre Court, in the final, is tennis' greatest challenge. I would back him to win, even at seventy-five per cent efficiency.

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### **Nadal makes it hard to imagine Roland Garros beyond him**

Undecimo. The world is learning Spanish thanks to Rafael Nadal. The eleventh title was a bit predictable thanks to the ease with which the defending champion went through the tournament. However, I was a little disappointed at the way the final went, and had expected a more challenging one for the great Spaniard. One would have expected a four-setter, if not a five-setter considering his opponent, Dominic Thiem, had defeated Nadal a few weeks ago.

The match started with much promise, as Thiem seemed equal to the task of matching Nadal stroke-for-stroke. However, from the time Nadal had a couple of break points which the young Austrian staved off, it was clear that he was playing catch-up, with Nadal setting the pace. Whenever Thiem looked like he might be closing in on Nadal's serve, the latter simply upped his game a notch to quell the danger. That was what was so remarkable about Nadal's win – it was clinical, effortless and he was at best pushed by Thiem; he was never threatened.

This means that the last six Grand Slams have been divided equally between Nadal and Roger Federer, aged 32 and 36, respectively. Where is the next generation? Why are they not winning the big tournaments?

There are two parts of this story. The first part is that we are seeing two of the greatest, if not the two greatest players ever, playing the game at the moment. Fifty years from now we would be speaking about this era and how incredibly remarkable Nadal was to have won 11 French Open titles and how Federer won 20 Grand Slams at the same time. These are two exceptional and unparalleled individuals and I think it would be hard to expect these records to be rewritten any time soon. All of us, fans, experts and their contemporaries should feel special to watch this dominance, this era, up close and personal. For two players to dominate a sport for nearly 15 years so completely is really quite unprecedented.

The other part is that like many others I, too, am a little concerned by the fact that Thiem, Alexander Zverev and Nicholas Kyrgios have not challenged these greats enough. Thiem is 24 years old and the others are roughly his age. They need to prove that it's their time in the sun and that they are ready to take over the mantle from these two greats as also from Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray.

But let none of this take anything away from the great champion. His excellence and his humility are exceptional and it's inspiring to see how committed he is to the game. I was amazed to hear him talk about life beyond Roland Garros at the post-match press conference. That he can imagine a time when he is not champion at Roland Garros is amazing – that's becoming hard to imagine for the rest of us!

The women's side had a very different story with Simona Halep winning her maiden Grand Slam title. I had mentioned Sloane Stephens' blemishless record in finals, so it was no surprise to see her fly off the blocks with her great serves and excellent footwork. In contrast, Halep seemed afraid; tentative and unsure for the first set. The crowds were rooting for her, but one could sense that they could see

the Romanian losing once again. However, Halep is a champion and she rediscovered her game just before it was too late. She played a high-risk braver game, going for her shots and managed to outgun the American in the second set. It took just 20 minutes for Halep to show that she has an aggressive all-court game, one that makes you despair that this was only her first Grand Slam title. I am glad she has got that first win out of the way, and I now hope she will win a few more because she is a wonderful champion and deserves more silverware.

As for Stephens, she was magnificent through the tournament and is young enough and quick enough to make a mark in future tournaments. She has already one Grand Slam under her belt and I expect a few more. In the women's side of the game at least, the future has arrived.