

## BORIS BECKER

Published 2.7.18

Focussed Djokovic the only real threat for flawless Federer

The most enjoyable fortnight of the year is here — at least for yours truly. Wimbledon has always been my favourite tournament and now it's home. It is also a very stressful time since I am always rooting for my favourite which is often more nerve racking than playing!

The only cloud on the sunny sporting weeks ahead is the exit of Germany from the World Cup. I am disappointed rather than sad because the way they played, they really did not deserve to be in the last 16.

Coming back to the tennis, the same question that is asked for the last decade or more is still relevant — who can beat Roger Federer? At 36, Federer has had a flawless run-up to the tournament. He won at Stuttgart and was runner-up at Halle. Along the way he defeated Mischa Zverev and Nick Kyrgios among others, which shows he is in fine touch.

Novak Djokovic looked focussed during the French Open and since he has had so much success here he is the most significant threat to Federer's primacy. I would have also mentioned Zverev for obvious reasons but an injury post-Paris has scuppered his preparations for Wimbledon.

The good news is that Andy Murray is back on the court after a long break. I don't know the extent of his recovery and would be able to assess his fitness only after a week.

And then there is Rafael Nadal who has also won here. He has not really prepared for grass as he was basking in the afterglow of his remarkable 11th win at Paris. But he is Rafa and if he manages to negotiate the tricky draw in the first week he will be a threat in the second week.

Coming to the women's side of the tournament, Garbine Muguruza is the defending champion and is a force this year as well. Her only issue is that she needs to be better on the days she does not get off to a great start.

Simona Halep is rightfully the top seed and I will expect her to do well here even though she has been on cloud nine and enjoying the aftermath of her first Grand Slam win at Roland Garros in Bucharest.

But once again the best news is the colossal presence of Serena Williams. And I am doubly happy that Wimbledon has seeded her at number 25.

Here's hoping for a sunny first week, and that the tennis will assuage some of my anguish at the German football team's exit.

Published 10.7.18

### Men handle the heat as ladies fall by the wayside

The first week has been starkly contrasting for the men and women at Wimbledon this year. It's been an exceptionally warm, nay hot, first week and the weather has only been matched by the scorching display of the top seeds in the men's draw. So starting with the men, there have not been too many surprises along the way, bar Marin Cilic and to some extent Alexander Zverev. The latter was not in peak fitness but it was still disappointing to see him exit in the first week itself. Cilic was hard done by the rain that gave his opponent (Argentine Guido Pella ) a chance, but his departure has really opened up that part of the draw.

Apart from these two blips, the top players expected to make the last sixteen are all there. Among them are four who should to go deep into the tournament. Juan Martin del Potro is looking very good and has kept below the radar. He seems to be in good physical shape and is really playing strong tennis. Watch out for him. There is also Rafael Nadal who is a potent threat once he gets past the first week. The dry courts are helping the bounce and that always is a shot in the arm for the great Spaniard. He is playing exceedingly well on his least favourite surface and I see him making an impact this week as well. Then there is Novak Djokovic who is gradually looking like the guy he was two years ago. He is moving well at the baseline, chasing down balls with his trademark intensity and, crucially, seems to be enjoying his tennis once again.

And then there is Roger Federer who, as far as I can remember, has not yet been broken! He has been playing flawlessly and hopefully will be able to sustain that form. The round of 16 would be over by the time you read this, but I am hoping these players enter the quarters.

The story is a little more complicated for the ladies. Only one of the top 10 seeds is still standing. This is owing to some extenuating circumstances for some of them but I feel the overpowering shadow of Serena Williams, too, is a factor. She has got through the first week and her presence seems to have affected players. Halep took a break after her first Grand Slam and is possibly out because she was short of grass court preparedness. Caroline Wozniacki looked a little tired and jaded after Eastbourne. However, it is hard to explain this mass exit and I hope it is a blip in the women's circuit because we have been seeing some consistency over the last few tournaments. Looking ahead, Angelique Kerber is in the draw but it's quite hard to look past Serena.

Published 13.7.18

### FedEx ousted; Tough to call Novak-Rafa match

The quarter-finals are when the men's tournament exploded at Wimbledon, compelling some eyeballs to turn from Russia to SW19 for at least one evening. The big news was the elimination of Roger Federer by the big-serving Kevin Anderson. Anderson, from South Africa, has been a grass court player of some repute for a few years now and has in the past troubled and even upset top players. No wonder then that he came into the tournament as the number eight seed.

However, this would be his biggest win so far and it would be fair to say that while Federer's loss of rhythm from the end of the third set was inexplicable, Anderson showed admirable resolve and courage, especially in the last set. Power in the serve as well off the ground is Anderson's main weapon and he just served better and better as the match went on. Clearly, a man on a mission. He has been in a Grand Slam final, so that gave him some confidence but, no doubt, beating Federer in Wimbledon was the biggest match of his life.

Why did Federer lose? I think he thought he had the game in the bag, relaxed a bit, became complacent and, when Anderson raised his game, I just feel he was unprepared and completely out-served. This is only natural as the defending champion has only lost twice when he was two sets up and never from match point for a straight sets win. And Court No. 1, which was also a factor, did not help him.

The Rafael Nadal-Juan Martin del Potro match was the better one because both players really played amazing tennis. Nadal looked imperious and inexhaustible even on grass. As mentioned in my last article the dry weather has made the courts harder and assured true bounce – conditions that suit Nadal. Delpo was excellent in the middle of the match and played outstandingly right through, but finally Nadal's legs and grinding groundstrokes were too good.

Nadal now plays a resurgent Novak Djokovic and that that's the second best match-up we can have in tennis. Djokovic is very much the more accomplished player on grass and certainly enjoys this surface a lot more than Nadal does. However, the way the Spaniard played on Wednesday, it would need a braver man than I to call the match. He has won here before and he looks in very good touch, so Djokovic will need to ensure that he brings his 'A' game to Centre Court.

The other semi-final between Isner and Anderson will have booming serves. My only concern is that Anderson might just be drained by the emotions and high-octane atmosphere that surrounded the quarter finals. I would put my money on Isner because he simply had a quieter Wednesday.

It was not quiet in the commentary box, though, with two monitors before us – one with the Nadal-Delpo match and the other with the England-Croatia match. It was crazy and the kind of evening every sports nut lives for!

Published 14.7.18

### Angelique will have to play out of her skin to beat Serena

Testimony to the fact that Serena Williams is going into a zone where only a couple of women have gone is this – I am starting my preview with her even when the other finalist is German. The sheer presence of Serena has been so overpowering that I cannot but wonder whether the exodus of top seeds was a sense of ominous foreboding that accompanies a champion of her stature.

Serena is looking better with every round and in many ways, a tough quarter final helped toughen her game before the semi-final. I had mentioned that it was unfair of the French authorities to have not seeded Serena at Roland Garros and in Wimbledon she has proven just why.

The powerful serve and court coverage are well and truly back, and it's really hard to see Serena actually lose the final. She got past the German Görge without really breaking into a canter and has enough energy to take on the next German in line.

The other finalist, Angelique Kerber has been in Grand Slam finals and even won a couple. This makes her a steadier player than she was a few years ago. She was professional and clinical against the precocious talent and energy of Ostapenko. The latter has taken good strides since the surprise win she had at the French Open last year, and I expect to see a lot more of her in these coming years. She is one of the youngsters who seem to have both talent and focus.

Coming back to Kerber, she has been in good form in this tournament and needs to just stay calm and train her mind to face the pressure of a final against the great Serena. She has a game suited for grass and her groundstrokes have great power. The only area she needs to focus on is her concentration and resolve.

As for Serena, nobody in world tennis has ever played more finals so there is really nothing more to say. She enjoys the pressure, embraces the accolades and plays with such a consuming passion that it is really going to take a Kerber playing out of her skin to beat Serena. Kim Clijsters was the first mom in a long time to win a Grand Slam. When Kim achieved that, Serena was the losing finalist. Little did we realise that the American runner-up would emulate the Belgian champion a few years down the line.

Published 17.7.18

### Wonderful to see Novak reclaiming his mojo

The weekend ended on the most wonderful note with Novak Djokovic coming back to claim the title on the very courts he had lost his mojo two Julys ago. I am no longer part of Team Novak but we remain good friends, keeping in touch, and always dropping by at my Wimbledon place for a chat. There was a time in the last 24 months when it was not clear whether Djokovic had another Grand Slam in him. The injuries, the commitment, the trials and tribulations on every front seemed to be closing in on the great champion. But he is back, returning and serving like he famously did a few years ago. He is ready to take his place again among the top players, alongside Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

Djokovic had a relatively easy final thanks to Kevin Anderson's excessively long semi-final and very long quarter final. However, he was really serving and returning exceptionally in the first two sets. And when Anderson did finally challenge him with some good tennis in the third set, he was able to raise his game a couple of notches to close out the match.

However, the match of the tournament was certainly the semi-final that the Serb played against Nadal. They both had to wait endlessly for the first semi-final to finish, but neither lost focus and came out all guns blazing. Djokovic ensured that he matched the great Spaniard in the baseline rallies, each chasing that extra ball with incredible speed and athleticism. While the first semi-final was all about big serves and small rallies, Nadal and Djokovic treated the spectators to the kind of tennis only they are capable of – long rallies, impossible returns and booming groundstrokes. Truly, tennis at its very best.

A word for the interminably long semi-final between Anderson and John Isner. This can happen on grass when two big servers play each other. I would strongly recommend a fifth set tiebreaker at 12-12 to break the impasse. The problem was evident on Sunday where I actually worried whether the long match would actually ensure that Anderson did not turn up. The South African did turn up but he looked a step behind and even his serves looked a little less threatening in the first two sets. For the sake of the players, I do hope common sense does prevail at Wimbledon.

The women's final was also a bit of a dampener and I feel that the extra two hours that Serena Williams and Angelique Kerber had to wait got into Serena's head. She came out without her usual free-swinging, big-serving game. The weight of the moment kind of got to her and it was clear that Kerber was the more composed player, and all her dedication and practice ensured she served well and did enough to get past Serena. Kerber was in fine form in 2016 and it is wonderful to see her back as a Grand Slam champion. Women's tennis in Germany could not ask for a more apt tennis queen who has made the most of her ability by sheer dint of hard work.

As for Serena, knowing her, this would have merely fuelled her hunger for more titles. It is incredible that she made the final of only her fourth tournament after coming back from her break. The way she is already playing, I can immediately predict that she is the favourite for the US Open a few weeks from now.