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Rafa the man to beat, with Novak close on his heels

A searingly warm New York is ready for the final Grand Slam of the year. The first two days are supposed to be even warmer, and this will test the players when they start out. Looking at the preparations for the US Open I will stick my neck out and say that Rafael Nadal is the man to beat. He has looked unbelievably good over the last six months, with the French Open win and a semi-final loss at Wimbledon. He has done well in the Masters circuit and is looking as good as he ever has on the hard courts.

Close on his heels would be Novak Djokovic who has also had a great preparation and build-up to the tournament. The win at Wimbledon would have done him a world of good and the return to his old set-up seems to have made the difference for him. The other men who have won this tournament before are Roger Federer, Andy Murray and Juan Martin Del Potro.

Federer has not played too many tournaments since Wimbledon and might just be a little short on hard court match-play as he prepares for the tournament. He has won here several times and is a big crowd favourite, and can never be written off on hard courts. Delpo on the other hand has been a little off-colour in the last few tournaments. The good news is that he normally keeps his best for big tournaments and more importantly, he has been injury-free for quite some time now.

Andy Murray has decided to play the tournament and that is great news even though it might be a little unrealistic to expect him to hit his 'A Game' straight away. The next few months will be crucial for Murray and I expect him to hit peak form around the Australian Open.

Once again, I hope some of the younger players go deep into the tournament. I have been saying this over the last two years now but I always see them falling short. It would be lovely to see Alexander Zverev or Nicholas Kyrgios make a mark on the tournament. I love the 'big four' dearly, but am now worried that the under-25 generation is not doing enough to challenge them.

Looking at the women's side, I expect strong performances from the defending champion Sloane Stephens and the top seed Simona Halep. The latter looks more relaxed now that she has one Grand Slam to her name. I also am optimistic about Angelique Kerber doing well after her wonderful return at Wimbledon. The women's side is hard to call with a bunch of challengers. And we cannot ever rule out the eternal favourite of New York, Serena Williams.

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Expect a thrilling final, but Novak has the edge

It is never a happy sight to see a Grand Slam semi-final ending with a retirement, but I was not surprised. I was on commentary for that match and it was clear from the start that the defending champion, Rafael Nadal, was having trouble with his knees. The punishing game that he played for nearly five hours against Dominic Thiem was simply too hard for the champion to recover from. That said, Juan Martin del Potro has had a great tournament and would have tested Nadal even if the latter were fully fit.

Delpo has been playing exceedingly well in the Slams recently, and came very close to beating Nadal at Wimbledon. Hard courts are his favourite surface and he has actually only dropped one set in this tournament. He has flown below the radar over the last two weeks but is now a match away from reclaiming the title he won nine years ago. The intervening years had been marred by a recurring wrist injury that even led to depression. The Argentine has shown remarkable resilience to get past all that and reach the upper echelons of the sport once again. This is the stuff of fairytales!

However, the man who will end this year with a feeling that he is close to the top, if not at the very top, is Novak Djokovic. He is the clear favourite in the finals and has played blemishless tennis for the last few months. He has been able to raise his game when he needs to and also remain calm. Djokovic has always had a strong game thanks to his strong all-court coverage and powerful groundstrokes. The last two years were tough and that was more to do with what he was feeling mentally, once he recovered from his injury. Fortunately for him, he was able to find his love for tennis, and his hunger, for winning. The family front, too, is settled and a source of inspiration and calm for the former champion.

The only twinge of worry one feels is that once again a Grand Slam has ended with the younger players flattering to deceive. Of the lot, I was impressed with Thiem, as he is the only one to make a Grand Slam final and was magnificent at Flushing Meadows, too. Sadly Nikolas Kyrgios and Alexander Zverev were not able to get past the first week and we end the year waiting for the young guns to storm the Rafa-Roger-Novak bastion.

Coming to Sunday's final, though Delpo's efforts have been commendable, I think Djokovic has the edge. I expect a thrilling final with grinding groundstrokes and long rallies. Whoever wins, both men will know that they have done well in this tournament, and indeed in this year.

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Serena owed her legacy more grace than she showed

It was an eventful weekend but we should celebrate two wonderful champions rather than get caught up in the surround sound engulfing the women's final on Saturday.

Japan got its first Grand Slam champion in the form of Naomi Osaka, who played incredibly powerful and well-strategised tennis against Serena Williams. A day later, a calm Juan Martin Del Potro was completely outplayed by Novak Djokovic in the men's.

I have never seen a women's final as intense and as widely discussed as this one. Serena Williams, Carlos Ramos, Patrick Mouratoglou all had a bad day at work. Ramos need not have stuck so closely to the rule book as he did because his primary duty is to help players across choppy waters. By insisting on docking a point and then a game he just blew the situation into a hugely combative one. Yes, he was technically right but these are players and not machines and often sense rather than censure works.

As for Serena, she really did have a meltdown when she was called for taking coaching. The racquet abuse was unnecessary and finally calling Ramos a thief was way, way out of line. Serena is a great champion and she is the one we are looking at— not Ramos and Patrick. She owes her stature and legacy more grace than what she showed. She has had words on court before but this time it went way beyond anything I have seen for a long time.

Patrick did what every single coach does — and I speak from experience. Each and every player is communicating with his coach. Tennis is the only sport that disallows this and there is absolutely no sense in this rule. I hope the sport's administrators look closely at this and try and find a way to make official a coach's role during match play. If Saturday's high drama precipitates changes in the way coaches can speak to their player, some good would come from it.

As a player and expert I will remember Saturday's final for the right reason — for seeing a young champion coming into her own. Naomi Osaka will not be a one-Slam wonder. She has a great all-court game and came into the tournament after a great performance at Indian Wells. She won the first set effortlessly and looked energetic and in fine touch. She kept her head through an eventful game and the coming years will hopefully see her mature into a fine player on the women's circuit.

The men's final between Delpo and Djokovic was a tad disappointing, particularly the second set. These two know each other's game well so there was no surprise that the first was full of crashing forehands from the Argentine, impossibly retrieved by Djokovic. The second set was when Delpo seemed flat and that was where the match seemed to fall out of his grasp.

The year ends with Djokovic clearly reclaiming his spot as the best player at the moment. He is in the top three now and if he keeps up this form, he will end the year as Number One. I am exceedingly happy because it's clear that he is enjoying tennis once again. He has reached 14 Grand Slams to level with Pete Sampras and looks good for a few more. If the year started with the celebration of the Roger-Rafa duet, it has ended with a virtuoso performance from Novak.