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Novak Djokovic Wins Australian Open, Tightens Grand Slam Race

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It was a highly unusual Australian Open, beginning with the prologue.

The qualifying tournament was disrupted because of smoke from the bushfires that have devastated large swaths of the country. A new team event, the ATP Cup, changed players' routines and schedules in January, the start of a new season.

The death of Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna on Jan. 26 in a helicopter crash, which killed nine people in Los Angeles, was felt by many during the middle of the tournament in Melbourne, including Bryant's friend and occasional mentee Novak Djokovic.

"I've been watching videos of Kobe and his family every single day since that happened, and it's devastating," Djokovic said.

But after all the upheaval and unexpected emotions, the conclusion of the Australian Open was reassuringly familiar for Djokovic.

He has won at the Australian Open more than anywhere in his long career. And on Sunday night, under clear skies and an open roof, he extended his men's record by securing an eighth men's singles title with a 6-4, 4-6, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 victory over Dominic Thiem.

"Definitely my favorite court and my favorite stadium in the world," Djokovic said after the mood-swinging final, which lasted 3 hours 59 minutes.

Djokovic beat Dominic Thiem 6-4, 4-6, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4, taking quick control of the fifth set. Credit...Asanka Brendon Ratnayake for The New York Times

The dig-deep victory allowed Djokovic, 32, to reclaim the No. 1 ranking from Rafael Nadal and to tighten the gap with archrivals Roger Federer and Nadal in the long-distance race to see who will finish with the most Grand Slam singles titles.

Federer, 38, holds the men's record with 20. Nadal, 33, has 19. Djokovic, the youngest of the trio, has 17 and has the record squarely in his sights even if he is finding it increasingly challenging to chase trophies around the world as the father of two young children. His family did not make the trip to Australia with him this year.

"I'm kind of going through these moments when I'm on the road just thinking, do I need to be away for so long?" Djokovic said in a recent interview. "Because I also don't want them to be part of this touring, so to say, entourage, because it's just taking away some of the things that are healthier and better for them."

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