

A YOUNGER LOT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE PLAYERS AT 2023 FRENCH OPEN

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For nearly two decades, a champion other than Rafael Nadal at Roland-Garros has been as elusive as a shadow at high noon on solar equinox. Ever since he made his debut in 2005, the legendary Spaniard has won the event a record 14 times, losing just three of his 115 matches. The occasional uprisings against his ironclad rule, mainly from Novak Djokovic, were crushed with characteristic menace; Nadal leads the Serb 8-2 on Parisian clay. French Open 2023, however, is set to herald a shift, for [Nadal will miss the event for the first time since 2004](#) because of the hip injury that has kept him out since January. There are signs that a change of guard is in the offing in men's tennis in general. With [Roger Federer retired](#) and [Djokovic out of form](#), the once vice-like hold of the 'Big Three' is at its weakest. Djokovic is a two-time champion and will be motivated to break the tie with Nadal on 22 Majors. But Carlos Alcaraz, the reigning World No.1 and winner of the French Open tune-up events in Barcelona and Madrid, seems primed to occupy centre stage. The 20-year-old has already established his Slam-winning credentials (2022 US Open), and a follow-up act will only embellish his status as the game's chosen one.

Challenging him will be the Scandinavian duo of No.4 Casper Ruud, who lost the 2022 summit clash to Nadal, and No.6 Holger Rune, finalist at both Monte Carlo and Rome recently. Daniil Medvedev has developed a newfound love for the red dirt following his success in Rome last week, but the Russian No.2 is at best a wild card, alongside Stefanos Tsitsipas, Andrey Rublev, Jannik Sinner, and Alexander Zverev. In contrast — and in a departure from the past — it is the women's field that wears a settled look, with Iga Swiatek, Aryna Sabalenka, and Elena Rybakina forming a dominant troika. They have swept the last four Majors and the Roland-Garros preparatory tournaments in Stuttgart, Madrid and Rome. If anything, Swiatek is just the first among equals, by virtue of being the World No.1, a two-time winner in Paris and a three-time Major champion. Tunisia's Ons Jabeur, who finished runner-up at Wimbledon and US Open in 2022, is coming back from a calf injury, but her triumphs in Madrid last year and Charleston in early April prove that she is a genuine contender. So is Czech Republic's Barbora Krejckova, the 2021 singles and doubles champion. All of this suggests there is no clear favourite, but no dark horses either.

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