



Sabalenka and Rybakina set for another Grand Slam showdown.

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By Kevin Rademeyer, Sports Journalist.

Photo Credit: WTA Tour.

Aryna Sabalenka has spent much of the US Open looking like a player determined not to let the title slip from her grasp again. Now, standing between the two-time defending champion and a third successive crown is the same opponent who denied her at the Australian Open.

Sabalenka reached her fourth consecutive US Open final on Thursday night with a commanding 7-5, 6-2 victory over home favourite Jessica Pegula. Elena Rybakina then produced another comeback against Coco Gauff, recovering from a set down to win 3-6, 6-4, 6-4 and reach her first final at Flushing Meadows.

It sets up a repeat of the Australian Open final, although the circumstances have changed considerably. Rybakina, who was ranked fifth when she won in Melbourne, will become the new world No. 1 on Monday, ending Sabalenka's 99 week stay at the top.

Sabalenka, however, arrives in New York in formidable form. She has won 20 consecutive matches at the US Open dating back to 2024 and has dropped only one set in reaching Saturday's final.

Pegula, who struggled to find an answer to Sabalenka's power, admitted afterwards that the top seed had produced something close to her best tennis of the season.

"I think that's definitely...probably the best match she's played this year. I thought her level was insane, she actually played worse against her before, but I think that level was probably the highest I've seen from her."

"I'm honestly not that upset because I don't really think there was much, I could have done today."

Sabalenka has hit 170 winners during the tournament, more than any other player in the women's draw, while her 25 converted break points also lead the field.

Her reward for that relentless aggression is another final and a chance to become the first woman since Serena Williams from 2012 to 2014 to win the US Open three years in a row.

"I wanted it badly, to go to the final, and of course I want to go all the way," Sabalenka said. "The mentality was just, I'm ready. I'm ready for whatever it's going to take to get the win."

Rybakina has had to work considerably harder for her place in the final. The Kazakh recovered from a set down against Qinwen Zheng in the quarterfinals before doing it again against Gauff, silencing a partisan Arthur Ashe Stadium crowd in the process.

Her route has been particularly impressive given the left ankle injury she suffered in Cincinnati three weeks ago. She also defeated two-time US Open champion Naomi Osaka in the fourth round.

Rybakina's serve will be central to Saturday's contest. She has struck 42 aces and has produced 143 winners on her way to the final.

The rivalry is already a substantial one. Sabalenka leads their head-to-head 10-7, although Rybakina won their most important meeting of the year when she came from behind to claim the Australian Open title.

Sabalenka responded by beating Rybakina in the Indian Wells final and Miami semi-final. Saturday will be their 18th meeting and their third Grand Slam final.

Speaking directly after her semi-final victory, Sabalenka said: "If it's Elena, it's going to be a really tough match. She's a big server. She really improved over the years on the baseline game, so it's going to be physically and mentally tough match."

Rybakina knows what is coming. "She's a very aggressive player. It's difficult to play with her, mentally, physically, because she has big game, big serve," she said.

If there is one player who knows how to win, it's Rybakina. Since the end of last year's US Open, she has the best win rate against WTA top 10 opponents. She has won 75 per cent of those matches and has claimed the most WTA top 10 wins over the last year with an 18-6 record.

"I will need to come with all the energy I will have, bring my best serve against Aryna and, yeah, make the right decisions in the right moment, because most of the times it's tight, tight score. This is where the decision makes a difference."

Rybakina can become the first player to defeat past women's singles champions in both the semi-final and final at the US Open since Justine Henin in 2007.

"It's an important match, and since it's a final, I feel like it doesn't matter who is on the other side. You just want to win and do your best. I don't want to put too much pressure on myself, because we are all very close in the ranking. Even if something goes wrong in the final, I still have other opportunities, other tournaments until the end of the year."

There is history and huge money on the line beyond the trophy. Saturday's singles champion will earn \$5.5 million, approximately R89 million, while the losing finalist will take home \$2.8 million, approximately R45 million.

The stakes could not be higher. Sabalenka has become the first player, male or female, in the Open Era to reach eight consecutive Grand Slam finals on hard courts, surpassing the previous mark of seven held by Steffi Graf, Martina Hingis and Novak Djokovic.

On Saturday, however, the numbers will matter less than the final itself. Sabalenka wants a third US Open title. Rybakina wants to win the tournament for the first time. And both know exactly what the other is capable of.

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