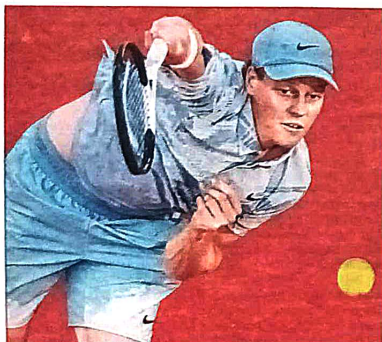


Merciless Sinner decimates home challenge on return to Parisian clay



World No. 1 Jannik Sinner during his first-round victory over Clement Tabur at the French Open on Tuesday night. (Reuters)

Paris: Jannik Sinner came so close to lifting the Musketeers' Trophy at Roland Garros last year, only for Carlos Alcaraz to snatch it up. This year the Italian top seed has a miniature Lego Eiffel Tower in the works with sights set on the win that slipped from his grasp last year.

And to that objective, he started off his French Open campaign with a merciless first-round win over Clement Tabur of France on Court Philippe-Chatrier.

The overwhelming favourite for the title, notwithstanding a certain Novak Djokovic in the fray, fighting for his record 25th grand slam crown, Sinner was all business on Tuesday night. He suffocated Tabur — another Frenchman to exit in the first round since the start of the tournament

— with relentless depth and pace from the baseline.

By the time the Paris sun dipped below the western stands, the world No. 1 was already one game away from a two-set lead in his 6-1, 6-3, 6-4 victory in his first match back here.

Last year's loss — after being two sets up with three championship points on Alcaraz's serve — in a five-hour 29-minute marathon must rankle with him but Sinner has greater motivation this time too. He is aiming to become just the seventh man in the Open Era to complete the career grand slam, joining one of the sport's most exclusive clubs.

The four-time grand slam champion came into Roland Garros on a 29-match winning streak in which he had

dropped only three sets, having also completed his full set of Masters 1000 titles earlier this month. He hasn't lost since getting beat by Jakub Mensik in the Qatar Open quarter-finals more than three months ago.

Attempting to become the first Italian man to win the singles trophy in Paris since Adriano Panatta 50 years ago, he showed little sign of vulnerability against Tabur.

Sinner broke immediately to open a 2-0 lead and snatched the Frenchman's serve again to go ahead 4-1 in a blistering start. A booming forehand sealed the opening set before the Italian raced through the second almost without breaking sweat.

Sweating heavily and backed loudly by the crowd, Tabur — making only his sec-

ond grand slam main-draw appearance — showed greater freedom in the third set.

The world No. 171 produced some fine shots that drew roars and briefly irritated Sinner but the 24-year-old quickly restored order.

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"I'm happy to be back here, where I have great memories. Overall the first round matches are never easy," Sinner said before addressing the crowd directly.

"Thanks for coming and thanks for being fair to me. I know I was playing a Frenchman."

For his next match, Sinner will swap the cool of the night session for the blazing heat of midday to take on

Juan Manuel Cerundolo in the second round.

"I'm happy to play (during the) day, whenever they put me, we'll see," he said.

Later, speaking at the news conference, he admitted to always feeling the pressure.

"It's part of us as a tennis player," he said. "I do believe everyone has pressure in their work. It's normal. So I try to take it in a very natural way. I know what kind of player I am."

"Then if you don't feel the pressure, it means you don't care. I do care a lot (about) what I'm trying to achieve on a tennis court. In any case, I try to do my best. I'm a competitor. I try to put myself in the best possible position, and that's it."

While he works towards

the only big title missing in his trophy cabinet, he also has a mission on the side. Finish building a miniature Eiffel Tower with Lego blocks with his brother.

They started the project when Sinner spent a few days at home in northern Italy after his Italian Open triumph.

"We tried to finish it. We couldn't. Because they are always the same pieces together. So at some point it's very boring. But you know we are not far away, so I know after this tournament I go back home and then I'm going (to) send you guys a picture when it's finished," Sinner told the crowd on Philippe-Chatrier.

"Hopefully — if we don't miss any pieces."

Written with inputs from Reuters & AP