

SPORT

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

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NOAH KHOO, St Joseph's Institution tennis player, on his struggles during his match at the Kallang Tennis Hub.



Doubles pair Noah Khoo (near right) and Takuya Kaneko posing with their medals after St Joseph's Institution's win in the National School Games B Division boys' tennis final on March 4. ST PHOTO: JASEL POH

School sports

SJI, MGS RETAIN CROWNS

St Joseph's boys dig deep to defeat ACS(I); Methodist girls cruise to 3rd straight title

Melvyn Teoh

A bundles of nerves would be an apt description of St Joseph's Institution's (SJI) Noah Khoo ahead of his first National School Games final.

To add to the pressure he felt in the B Division boys' tennis title decider against Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), his doubles match also turned out to be a must-win encounter as both teams were tied at 2-2.

But the 14-year-old, who partnered Takuya Kaneko, kept his calm and stepped up as they came from behind twice - 3-0 in the first set and 5-4 in the second - to win 6-4, 7-5, helping SJI retain the title at the Kallang Tennis Hub on March 4.

Noah, who was told that he would be playing in the final four days prior, said: "I was really ner-

vous before the match, because I've never played in a final before as I thought I wasn't going to get picked.

"I actually developed a sore throat during the match, because the air was very cold and I've never played in this environment before," added Noah, who cited a previous comeback win over the same opponents and his faith in God for steadying his nerves.

"I thought we were going to lose because of my sore throat, but we managed to pull through."

SJI had led 2-0 after wins in the first two singles matches - Cedric Tan defeated Matthew Tay 6-4, 6-1, while Justin Lie beat Joshua Kwan 6-1, 6-1.

But ACS(I) halved the deficit by clinching the first doubles, with Dylan Chan and Jack Khoo beating Asher Sandhu and Ng Shen Wei 6-2, 3-6, 6-4. Andre Harnadi then levelled the scores with his 6-3,

6-0 win over Brennon Ng.

That set the stage for Noah and Takuya's comeback victory over ACS(I)'s Koh Heng Kai and Ryan Tang, which sent the SJI supporters into a frenzy.

SJI coach Tan Xu Teng said: "Our boys played very bravely, considering that they lost 4-1 two years ago to the same team in the C Division.

"It's a wonderful stadium where all three courts can see each other and the second wave is waiting behind... So inevitably, when they (Noah and Takuya) go on, they will know the big picture.

"They knew that it's either them or Brennon, one of them had to win and the expectation and the understanding is that they go out there and do their best."

In a day of drama, SJI's Cedric was given just 15 minutes' notice that he would be playing in the final, having pulled his hamstring on Feb 19 and missed the semi-final against Victoria School on Feb 24.

The 15-year-old said: "I got my injury during training and I didn't play for a few days... But I'm thank-

ful that the coaches allowed me to play the final, and I was quite happy that they have faith in me and that I managed to perform for the school."

ACS(I)'s Ryan, who broke down after losing the decider, admitted that there was pressure on them, but was proud that "they never gave up".

In the girls' final, Methodist Girls' School (MGS) beat Nanyang Girls' High School 4-1 to clinch their third straight B Division title.

MGS had led 2-0 following Janie Ho's 7-5, 6-2 win over Kate Yap and Natalie Chen's 7-5, 6-3 victory over Janelle Chen.

Nanyang pulled one back through doubles pair Kyra Lee and Kayla Quah, who beat Chevonne Hoi and Rebecca Lum 6-2, 6-3.

But MGS' second doubles duo Caitlin Woo and Clara Chow secured the title with a 6-2, 6-1 win over Isabelle Lim and Yuan Jia Tong, before Kelly Chen put the icing on the cake with a 6-1, 6-0 victory over Wang Xin Yan.

Nanyang's Chevonne had to find a new partner after captain Kier-

sten Lim underwent surgery in January, leaving the latter out of action for over a month.

Despite their loss, Chevonne said: "For Rebecca, it was a new experience and they (Rebecca and Kiersten) have different playing styles... so it was a good new experience. I have to learn to play with different people as a doubles partner and you just have to be ready for the unexpected.

"Regardless of the result, we are happy that our team did well."

MGS coach Ang Hock Chai said: "I chose the best from my team and they had to make sure that they can calm themselves, play to their best and not be worried about the surroundings.

"Before the start of the tournament, everybody was looking at us and felt that we should be the favourites to win..."

"I trust the players, but I was just concerned about their mental strength inside here... but they turned out to be really good in the end."

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New coach Dave Rennie will lead the New Zealand rugby side until the end of the 2027 World Cup.

All Blacks' Rennie all in on their style of play

WELLINGTON - Dave Rennie was named as replacement for Scott Robertson as coach of the All Blacks on March 4 and charged with taking New Zealand to a fourth World Cup triumph in Australia in 2027.

The 62-year-old former Wallabies coach beat out Jamie Joseph for one of the biggest jobs in world rugby after an extensive recruitment process that started when Robertson made the surprise decision to step down halfway through his contract in mid-January.

Rennie, the first All Blacks coach with Pacific Islander heritage, was handed a contract through to the end of the 2027 World Cup but will honour his commitment to Japan's Kobe Steelers before preparing New Zealand for the July Tests.

"I'm extremely proud to have been entrusted with this role and understand the expectations that come with it," Rennie said in a New Zealand Rugby (NZR) statement.

Robertson stepped down in the wake of a critical review of his stewardship of the team last season, when the All Blacks won 10 of 13 Tests but were humbled at home by the Springboks and also lost to Argentina and England.

NZR chairman David Kirk made it clear that there were high expectations about the type of rugby the All Blacks would play.

"He is a world-class coach who has consistently shown he can build strong performance environments and win," the former All Blacks skipper said.

"Dave understands what it means to coach the All Blacks and play a style of rugby that reflects who we are as New Zealanders."

Rennie, who has Cook Islands heritage through his mother, made his name as the coach of the New Zealand Under-20 team which won three junior world titles between 2008 and 2010.

He enjoyed more success in Super Rugby as coach of the Waikato Chiefs side which clinched back-to-back titles in 2012 and 2013 before moving to Scotland with the Glasgow Warriors.

Rennie was appointed Australia coach in late 2019 and oversaw 34 Tests over three seasons, winning just 13.

He was sacked in early 2023 to make way for the ill-fated return of Eddie Jones.

Former All Blacks flanker Liam Messam, who played under Rennie for the Chiefs, said it was an "awesome" appointment.

"It's great news... to have a great leader like that lead the ship," he told the New Zealand Herald.

"A lot of experience, obviously, but he is a great man to bring in the culture and the connection."

Rennie said he was clear on the way he wanted the All Blacks to play.

He said: "We have a lot of talent here and we will be working extremely hard to make the country proud."

Meanwhile, more than 750,000 tickets for the 2027 Rugby World Cup in Australia were snapped up by fans from 135 countries in the pre-sale phase, with organisers claiming it as a record for the initial stage of allocation.

The 2027 World Cup will be the first with 24 teams and 2.5 million tickets for the 52 matches will go on sale before the tournament starts on Oct 1, 2027.

REUTERS

Alcaraz keeps calm and carries on record chase



Two-time Indian Wells Open champion Carlos Alcaraz arrives in California with a better temperament and a 12-match unbeaten streak. PHOTO: AFP

INDIAN WELLS - World No.1 Carlos Alcaraz believes controlling his emotions has been the secret of his unbeaten start to 2026 as he chases a third title of the year at Indian Wells.

The 22-year-old Spanish star made history in Melbourne in Feb-

ruary with victory at the Australian Open, becoming the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam.

He followed that up by claiming the Qatar Open title and arrives in California on the back of 12 straight wins since the turn of the year.

Alcaraz, who is targeting a third Indian Wells title after wins in 2023 and 2024, says he is not dwelling on Novak Djokovic's record 41-match winning streak from 2011.

"Obviously, I know that 41, Novak holds the record," Alcaraz told reporters on March 3. "You don't realise how difficult it is until you're chasing that."

"When you're on 12 wins, it's like (winning) four or five more tournaments, the biggest tournaments in the world. You realise... how impressive it is."

Alcaraz, who has already amassed seven Grand Slam titles, puts his recent success down to learning to keep his temperament in check.

"I think on the court I just control my emotions even better," he said. "I would say that was the key of, you know, the good level of tennis that I have been playing lately... I just control myself, and in a calm place I can find the solutions and I can go through."

"When I was getting mad or when I was playing bad or whatever, I just found the right way again because I was calm."

Alcaraz could be headed for another high-profile showdown with rival and world No. 2 Jannik Sinner in what has become the sport's most compelling matchup.

"What's interesting about Carlos and Jannik is that whenever one gains an edge, the other goes away, figures things out and comes back better," Tennis Channel analyst Prakash Amritraj told Reuters this week. AFP, REUTERS

INDIAN WELLS

Day 2: StarHub Ch201, March 6, 5am

Best-of-five Slams will favour me: Sabalenka

INDIAN WELLS - World No.1 Aryna Sabalenka on March 3 voiced her support for a proposal to make women's matches best-of-five sets during the later stages of Grand Slam tournaments.

Speaking ahead of the ATP-WTA tournament in Indian Wells, the hard-hitting Sabalenka said she believed switching to five sets would benefit her game.

"Yeah, let's do that," the four-time Grand Slam singles champion said when asked about the idea.

"I feel like I would have probably more Grand Slams," Sabalenka, who announced her engagement to Georgios Frangulis on March 3, added. "Physically I'm really strong and I'm pretty confident that my body can handle that."

Craig Tiley, the former head of the Australian Open who on Feb 24 was named as the new United States Tennis Association chief, told The New York Times in an interview in February that switching to five sets from the quarter-finals onwards at Grand Slams should be discussed.

But while Sabalenka, 27, backed the move, other women players were more circumspect.

"I mean, it probably would favour me, because I'm physically up there with the best, but I mean, I probably wouldn't want to see that happen," reigning French Open champion and world No. 4



Aryna Sabalenka says she would have more than four Majors if they were in a best-of-five format.

Coco Gauff said.

Six-time Grand Slam champion and former world No. 1 Iga Swiatek was firmly against the idea and questioned whether the suggestion would boost audiences.

"It's a weird approach in the world where everything is becoming faster," said the 24-year-old Pole. "So I don't know if the audience honestly would like that."

"Also, I don't know if we would be able to keep the quality for five sets. Well, that's a fact, like, men are more physically strong and they can handle it for sure better."

Swiatek said the physical demands would also force players to adjust their schedules, potentially leading to them playing fewer tournaments.

"I think, our whole calendar, because the Grand Slams would be so tough that I don't think we would have honestly time to prepare for any other tournaments," she said.

"I think it would change a lot. I don't think it would change anything for good."

AFP, REUTERS