Carlos Alcaraz tops Jannik Sinner in Indian Wells semifinal in latest chapter of their epic rivalry



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INDIAN WELLS, Calif. – They're going to be doing this for a while, Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner.

Barring some kind of unforeseen circumstance or calamitous injury, the 20-year-old Spaniard and the 22-year-old Italian are going to spend some number of years packing stadiums and playing their gasp-inducing, "can-you-top-this-yes-I-can" version of a sport that is equal parts boxing, ballet, tug-of-war and drag racing.

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One second they are smacking balls across the net with a frightening ferocity. The next they are feathering them with the delicate touch of a lepidopterist catching butterflies on a summer afternoon.

The latest chapter in this narrative they are crafting — Chapter 8 if books are your thing — unfolded Saturday in the semifinals of the BNP Paribas Open.

Sinner came in riding a 19-match winning streak, looking to put the final touch on a takeover of a sport that Alcaraz appeared to have seized from the two-decade clutch of Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal. Alcaraz arrived without a tournament win since July, desperate to right his course and draw even in his head-to-head battle with Sinner, the best player in the world the past four months.

And when it finally ended after three furious sets of a topsy-turvy match that had both players scrambling with breathless desperation and Sinner diving dangerously across the hard court, Alcaraz raised his arms with a mix of triumph and relief for the sort of day he had not managed in months.

Recovering from the tennis equivalent of an uppercut to the jaw, Alcaraz found just enough of his aggression and magic to climb out of a deep hole and win 1-6, 6-3, 6-2.

As in every one of their duels, Sinner and Alcaraz played a match but also a series of one highlight reel point after another. One had both of them running up and back and diagonally across the court, and left them laughing at the absurdity of their shots. Running forehands onto the lines, drop shots within inches of the net, reflex volleys off rocketed passing shots. That's what these two do.

And then it all turned, on the final point of the fourth game of the third set, with Alcaraz holding a rare chance to break Sinner's serve. How slim was the margin? Whatever number of millimeters it was that allowed an Alcaraz forehand to tick the net and send Sinner sprinting to catch up with the dying ball. Somehow he got there in time for a quickfire exchange in the middle of the court at the net that ended with him diving to get to Alcaraz's snap backhand overhead volley.

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Sinner was just short. Worse, his elbow and wrist got backed up. By the time he recovered, Alcaraz was a game from the match, and soon clinched it with a whipped inside-out forehand from his kill zone a few feet inside the baseline.

"Playing here is magic," he told the capacity crowd of 16,000 at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden when it was over.

That's about right.

Not long ago, just last summer, it all looked simple for Alcaraz.

Federer was retired. Nadal was out indefinitely for hip surgery that he still has yet to fully recover from. Djokovic had been vanquished on Centre Court at Wimbledon and would likely exit stage

right before too long, while Alcaraz, a 20-year-old two-time Grand Slam winner would take over the sport and win the next 25 or 30 Grand Slams.

In the span of four months, Sinner has set fire to all that, and with a win on Saturday, would have made it painfully clear to Alcaraz and everyone else in the sport that he is the man to beat right now, and maybe for a very long time.



GO DEEPER

Can anyone beat Jannik Sinner?

Sinner, the red-headed Italian with the spindly legs that scramble across the court and the long arms that whip balls over the net with a frightening ferocity, demolished Alcaraz in the first set with the kind of dominance that sends a scare through a locker room.

The beating was slow at first, mostly because of a three-hour rain delay after the first three games that stopped play with Sinner leading 2-1. When play resumed, it happened scarily fast, with Sinner dominating with machine-like efficiency, assuming there is a machine that can run and swing a racket and switch directions on a full-sprint, bend a live organism like a tennis match to its will.

Alcaraz's losses — an increasingly common occurrence since the summer — generally follow a certain pattern. The other guy plays one of the great matches of his career on a day when Alcaraz is just a little off.

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The deadly forehand grows wild. His serve, the weakest part of his game, doesn't find its groove, landing in the middle of the box and leaving him vulnerable to an attack. He gets desperate and starts trying to pull off miracle shots to save the day. They don't work, and he falls valiantly just short.

That wasn't the pattern initially on Saturday. Sure, Alcaraz missed plenty, but mostly because Sinner was so much better.



GO DEEPER

Carlos Alcaraz hasn't won a title since Wimbledon. So what's going wrong?

For nearly all of 2022 and the first half of last year, Alcaraz pinned opponents 10 feet behind the baseline and nearly knocked the racket out of their hands with his power. That's what Sinner did through the first set on Saturday.

At nearly every hard-court tennis tournament, organizers paint the locale on the green space far behind the baseline. On so many points, especially when Sinner was blasting what is fast becoming one of the best serves in the sport, Alcaraz struggled to get his feet in front of the block of white letters that spelled out "Indian Wells," allowing Sinner to step in and rip balls through the court, toying with Alcaraz as a schoolyard bully messes with a child.

Ahead 4-1, he stepped and crushed a floater at the service line with a swinging forehand volley that sent Alcaraz into a kind of fog. A point later, he essentially quit with the ball still in play after a lazy half-volley, remembering at the last second that he got where he did by not quitting on points. Only by the time he did, another ball was hurtling by him.

Alcaraz knew he would have to make some radical changes if he stood any chance of not embarrassing himself. He served and volleyed. He rushed the net whenever he found an opening. The best drop shot in the game started to appear, and he kept going to it, even when Sinner's speed allowed him to catch up to every other one.

Finally, he broke Sinner's serve for the first time in the fourth game, and didn't let Sinner break his serve for the rest of the night.

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For two weeks Sinner has said his winning streak would not last. The players are too good. Tennis matches turn and go in the wrong direction in an instant, even when it seems like they won't.

He didn't mention by name perhaps the biggest factor of all.

This guy Alcaraz, his good friend and occasional practice partner, a guy he chats with in the tunnel under the stadium before they go to war with each other, he's pretty good