

Tennis

U.S. Open

Pegula rallies, heads to first Slam final

American overcomes early deficit vs. Muchova to advance, faces Sabalenka

By Howard Fendrich
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Jessica Pegula shrugged off a sluggish start and came back from a set and a break down at the U.S. Open to defeat Karolina Muchova, 1-6, 6-4, 6-2, on Thursday night for a berth in her first Grand Slam final.

The No. 6-seeded Pegula, a 30-year-old from New York, has won 15 of her past 16 matches and will meet No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka for the title on Saturday.

Sabalenka, last year's runner-up to Coco Gauff at Flushing Meadows, returned to the championship match by holding off a late push to beat No. 13 Emma Navarro of the U.S. 6-3, 7-6 (2).

Things did not look promising for Pegula early: Muchova, the 2023 French Open runner-up but unseeded after missing about 10 months because of wrist surgery, employed every ounce of her versatility and creativity, the traits that make her so hard to deal with on any surface.

The slices. The touch at the net. The serve-and-volleying. Ten of the match's first 12 winners came off her racket. The first set lasted 28 minutes, and Muchova won 30 of its 44 points.

"I came out flat, but she was playing unbelievable. She made me look like a beginner," Pegula said. "I was about to burst into tears because it was embarrassing. She was destroying me."

Muchova grabbed eight of the first nine games and was one point from leading 3-0 in the second set. But she

couldn't convert a break chance there, flubbing a forehand volley, and everything changed.

"I was thinking, 'All right. That was kind of lucky. You're still in this,'" Pegula said. "It comes down to really small moments that flip momentum."

Quickly, the 52nd-ranked Muchova went from not being able to miss a shot to not being able to make one. And Pegula turned it on, demonstrating the confident brand of tennis she used to eliminate No. 1 Iga Swiatek, a five-time major champion, in straight sets on Wednesday. Pegula had been 0-6 in major quarterfinals before that breakthrough.

Took Pegula a while to play that well Thursday, but once she got going, whoa, did she ever. All told, she collected nine of 11 games, a span that allowed her to not merely flip the second set but race to a 3-0 edge in the third.

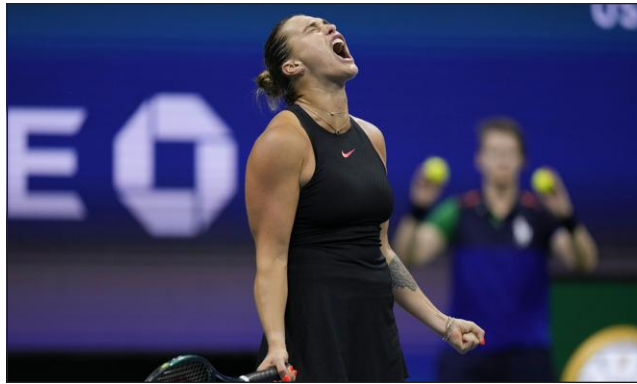
Muchova, a 28-year-old from the Czech Republic, who hadn't ceded a set in the tournament until then, began to fade. After going 7 for 7 on points at the net in the first set, she went 11 for 19 in the second. After only seven unforced errors in the first set, she had 19 in the second.

And all the while, the Arthur Ashe Stadium crowd that was flat at the beginning — save for the occasional cry of "Come on, Jess!" — was roaring.

When things suddenly got quite tight in the second set of the first semifinal, and spectators suddenly got quite loud while pulling for Navarro, Sabalenka found herself flashing back to 2023,



Kena Betancur/AFP via Getty Images
Jessica Pegula celebrates after defeating Karolina Muchova during a singles semifinal Thursday at the U.S. Open in New York.



Seth Wenig/Associated Press
Aryna Sabalenka reacts against Emma Navarro during a singles semifinals.

when a rowdy Ashe crowd bothered her while backing Gauff.

"Last year, it was a very tough experience. Very tough lesson. Today in the match, I was, like, 'No, no, no, Aryna. It's not going to happen again. You have to

control your emotions. You have to focus on yourself,'" said Sabalenka, the champion at the last two Australian Opens. "There was people supporting for me; I was trying to focus on them. I'm thinking, 'Come on. There's so many people supporting

you. There is your team in the box. There is your family. Just focus on yourself and try to — not try, just fight for it."

Sabalenka, a 26-year-old from Belarus, joked after her previous match she would try to sway the fans to her side by buying booze, saying, "Drinks on me tonight?"

Navarro did not fold in the second set, despite trailing for much of it, and as the noise around her grew, she broke when Sabalenka attempted to serve for the victory at 5-4.

"I wasn't ready for the match to be over," Navarro said.

But in the tiebreaker that followed, Sabalenka took over after Navarro led 2-0, grabbing every point that remained.

"I kind of got my teeth into it there at the end of the second set," said Navarro,

who got past Gauff in the fourth round, "and I felt I could definitely push it to a third. Wasn't able to do so."

If Sabalenka is as demonstrative as can be, often holding a fist aloft and screaming after a big point or rolling her eyes after a miss, Navarro is far more subdued, rarely, if ever, betraying a hint of emotion, whether positive or negative.

Even when she broke to 5-all, there wasn't a way to tell what happened by looking at Navarro. The sounds from the seats were an indication. But soon, thousands of ticket-holders were saluting Sabalenka for her latest show of mastery on a hard court; she's now into her fourth straight final at a major held on that surface.

"Well, guys, now you are cheering for me," Sabalenka with a laugh. "Well, it's a bit too late."

She produced 34 winners and 34 unforced errors — punctuating most of her groundstrokes with a yell — and, in a fitting bit of symmetry, Navarro had 13 winners and 13 unforced errors.

Sabalenka showed she is not simply a swing-from-the-heels power player, even if that is the foundation of her game.

She delivered one optimally timed return winner to help break for a 4-2 lead early. She offered up two terrifically delicate drop shots to earn points later in that set. When Navarro failed to get a return in play off a 100 mph serve, Sabalenka was halfway to the win.

"That's really important — to have all the skills, all the variation in your game," Sabalenka said, "and especially on those crucial moments when opponents are used to one (type of) tennis from me."

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