

Ash Barty's sorcery helps her to survive life under the Australian lens

Throwing off the burden of 44 years of history with a little help from the crowd, Ash Barty rose to the occasion



Ash Barty poses with Evonne Goolagong Cawley, four times an Australian Open singles champion, after receiving the trophy from her.

Emma Kemp at Melbourne Park
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The cameras follow her every move, close to 100 lenses all expertly trained almost singularly on the star of this show. Court-side, the photo pit is full to the brim, its occupants either sat on chairs or crouched on their haunches, each with their assigned sliver of space through which to document their protagonist.

Ash Barty stands at the baseline, steals a quick glance up and over the net towards her waiting adversary, then bounces and tosses the ball. Photographers capturing what they see work for different publications but the process is always the same: bodies lean slightly forward and eyes lock on to viewfinders. Then, they are still.

Barty serves and sets about wearing Danielle Collins down. With each chase and pivot the cameras shift, just a little but in perfect unison. She nails a winner and they stand down with a prompt pull back of the head and shake of the leg, releasing the tension until the next point.

This process occurs again and again for an hour and a half. They are documenting history, shooting an Australian icon-in-waiting, and no moment can be missed. The pressure is on – and they are not the only ones inside Rod Laver Arena feeling it.

Such occasions have come and gone more than once in the past 44 years. Barty has tried and failed. Never before, though, has she made it to the final. Now she is here, having steamrolled every opponent in her path. Everyone in the country says she is unstoppable and she might even know she is. But the stadium lights feel even brighter than usual and the thought of her losing feels darker. Everyone, basically, is a little bit twitchy.



Spectators hold up the Australian and Aboriginal flags during Ash Barty's final against Danielle Collins.

Quite what Barty is thinking remains one of the great tennis mysteries. Even carrying this mighty load she reveals no emotion. Stony-faced, the 25-year-old saves an uncharacteristically shaky service game with a forehand down the line. Her shots are coming easily. Her backhand slices skim so low the net feels the wind on its neck.

She is up 3-2 and has a break point. Collins double faults. When Barty takes the first set the crowd cheers as if she has won the match. And surely she will; all tournament she has dealt only in eviscerations and this has all the ingredients of another.

Barty wins the opening set to a stadium-wide standing ovation. Russell Crowe nods in approval from the front row. The Barty Vegemite T-shirt crew are out in force. Australia flags are plentiful. Between them are Aboriginal flags, a nod to the player's heritage and the importance of this one, single opportunity. Cathy Freeman is here and knows this, almost 22 years after she managed a similarly beautiful achievement.

It is Collins to serve first but the cameras point again towards a bending Barty, swivelling her racket between her hands, waiting to receive. Something is stirring in

the American, a ball-striker of the highest calibre in her first major final, battling not only the world's best player but everybody else present. She is not on her turf but will claim it if she has to.

'A really special moment': Ash Barty wins first Australian Open title – video

She has Barty on the ropes in her opening service game. The local favourite is down 15-40 and needs some encouragement. The crowd give it to her. She thanks them with an ace. But then the cameras follow her back to the furthest corner, where Collins has sent her scurrying and from where she stretches for a speculative lob that practically invites the inevitable smash.

Collins has her break and then a 4-1 advantage. She flexes a biceps. If the crowd will not pump her up she will do it herself. The 28-year-old is used to fighting, to overcoming illness and injury and all the pain that comes with it. Something is awry in the home camp. Is this the Australian Open curse the statisticians keep talking about? Can all these strangers in their seats do enough on their own to help exorcise these demons? If only Evonne Goolagong Cawley was here.

Collins needs only serve out this set and the nation will surely endure a 45th year without a home singles champion. An ambulance siren sounds on the street outside, a reminder there are more important things happening. But the world begins and ends inside Melbourne Park and when Collins faults a voice cries from the gallery: "Oh yeeeeaaaaah."

Unsavoury though it is, it sparks something in the real Barty, who re-emerges from wherever she has been. A winner whizzes down the line. Then another and another and she has two breaks of her own. This had three sets written all over it. What is this sorcery? How is she 5-1 up in a tie-break that was not going to happen?

At the change of ends the big screen captures her walking past the trophy. The cameras would have caught that too. Still not a hint of emotion. Until there is and Barty storms into the middle of the court and lets out every inch of the scarcely conceivable pressure so many Australian players have heaved about on this surface for too long. Mouth wide open, almost shaking.

Everyone is shaking. Goosebumps appear on skin. A sea of mobile phones rise. Barty races over to the former player Casey Dellacqua, a good friend. She is sitting next to the photo pit, perfect for a close-up to put on the pages of every newspaper and history book.

But the photographers did not know what was still to come. Not even Barty knew, until she saw Goolagong Cawley stride out from her hiding place in the bowels of the arena and up on to the stage to present her with her trophy. Tennis and Indigenous royalty, all in one.

"Hell of a surprise," Barty says. "I do not quite know how Craig [Tiley, the head of Tennis Australia] kept that secret. I am really glad I did not know, I think I would have been under the pump, feeling it."

For a short period she was, but this flawed final was also flawless.