



ITTF CHALLENGE PLUS NIGERIA OPEN

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Aruna Quadri of Nigeria



Barbora Balazova of Russia



Bojan Tokic of Slovenia



Cedric Nuytinck of Belgium

Big Guns Take Stage



Dina Meshref of Egypt



Polina Mikhailova of Russia



Robert Gardos of Austria



Yana Noskova of Russia

TOP seeds in the men and women singles will take to the table today as the main draw of the 2019 ITTF Challenge Plus Nigeria Open enters the third day – after the preliminaries in which unseeded players slugged it out to eliminate each other for places in the main draw.

These upcoming players in the game would now test their mettle against some of the top seeds in the first round of the tournament.

Excitement continues to build among thousands of fans thronging the Molade Okoya-Thomas Hall venue of the tournament inside the Teslim Balogun Stadium in Lagos. Seven titles are at stake in this elite

tournament on African soil with \$60,000 prize money up for grabs.

Home boy and defending champion, Aruna Quadri, has put the disappointment of the ITTF Africa Cup behind him. He would aim to emulate Egypt's Omar Assar as the only player to have defended his title at this tournament.

During the opening press conference on Tuesday August 6, Quadri, who is seeded number one in the men's singles, said he would not be playing under any pressure as he aims to give his best and make Nigeria proud.

Also in for the title is Belgium's Cedric Nuytinck from whom many fans here expect surprises because aspects of his play appear unconventional even

as he is famous for being a player for the big occasion such as the Nigeria Open.

Slovenia's Bojan Tokic, known in table tennis fandom as "the gentle giant", is also here. The 38-year-old Slovak is expected to delight with his tricky style of play which usually confuse opponents.

Robert Gardos, 40, is considered one of the hardest working players in the world even at that age. Gardos, a finalist at the 2019 Hungarian Open, is another star to watch out for here.

In the women category, Slovakia's Barbora Balazova leads the pack as the Southpaw aims for a title away

from Europe.

On the pecking order is Russia's Polina Mikhailova. The 32-year-old is looking for her first title in Africa.

African champion and winner of the just concluded ITTF Africa Cup, Dina Meshref, hopes to reclaim her title this year, having missed the 2018 edition.

25-year-old Yana Noskova will want to use the tournament to shape up for the European season, even as the Russian would aim to garner points qualification to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in Japan.

All 32 seeded players in the men and 16 seeded in the women singles will be in action today.

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I'll win Nigeria Open sooner than later – Okanlawon

USMAN Okanlawon announced himself to Africa with his performance at the African Junior Championship held in Accra, Ghana earlier this year.

Since then, Okanlawon's confidence continues to grow, culminating in his recent triumph at the World Hopes Challenge in Oman.

Such is the rising star's belief in his ability that he sees himself winning the men's singles title of the ITTF Challenge Plus Nigeria Open in no distant future.

Already, Okanlawon has caused a major upset on Day One of the competition when he overcame the more experienced Amadi Omeh 3-2.

In that pulsating encounter, Okanlawon raced to the lead 2-0 but Omeh rallied to restore parity and soon put the encounter at 2-2. The fifth and deciding match was a huge epic cheered by the appreciative fans. The youngster laughed last with a superb win over Omeh – a crucial win in his debut at senior level.

An excited Okanlawon said: "This is my first time of playing against him

and I was told that I should play with confidence and so I did. I will be competing in the senior category for the first time, I hope to see myself in the final stages and meet the likes of Aruna Quadri and the rest of them. But I am happy I defeated my opponent."

Riding on the crest of that shock win on his senior debut, an excited Okanlawon said: "I am confident that in no distant time I can emerge champion of this tournament. Competing this year has really increased my confidence and I am hoping that I can learn more from the top players."

Another debutant at the Nigeria Open this year, India's Soumyajit Ghosh has described the tournament as exciting following the huge presence of fans from Day One of play.

The Indian star said: "It is a good one for me. This is my first time in Nigeria and Africa. The fans are very cheerful. I will like to play each match and keep going match by match. This is my game plan."

The qualifying matches end today as players aim for places in the advance stage of the championship.



The return of Mustapha brothers



Musa Mustapha



Mustapha Mustapha