

2007 Pacific Life Finals run a Similar Course

by Rick Angus
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When play began in the joint ATP-WTA 2007 Pacific Life Open, the talk was all about the dominance of Roger Federer in the men's event and on the woman's side, the inevitable nature of the Sharapova juggernaut.

Where was the suspense to be had in viewing the tennis given that the final results were a given? In the ladies competition, the depth of field was weakened by the absence of many of the bigger name players, such as the Williams' sisters or the Dutch titans of Henin and Clijsters. Even the lesser threat of Amelie Mauresmo was sidelined by an attack of appendicitis.

Woe be it for the unfortunate fan! The prospect of routine victories by the top seeds and the repeat crowning of the 2006 champions would make the fortnight predictable to a fault. Well, that sure changed in a hurry.

With the sudden loss of the world's unchallenged number 1 player, Federer, in a surprising second round upset by Guillermo Canas, a suspended player returning from 15 months of no tournament play, the draw was seemingly wide open to the strongest field in tennis. The surface is equally fair to all. A cement court in perfect California weather made it possible for the players to compete without any particular favour to one style of player, be they a clay courter or at the other extreme, even an indoor specialist.

Rafael Nadal, the number 2 seed, did not automatically inherit the mantle of champion in waiting as his performance dating from the 2006 Wimbledon final had not included an appearance in the final of any tournament since that surprisingly close match against Federer, where the king was at inner peace within his beloved London confines.

A last minute inclusion of Svetlana Kuznetsova was supposed to shore up the womens field to give Sharapova a rougher test en route to another PacLife title. Little was expected of the other challengers and shock reverberated throughout the grounds when a fellow Russian, Vera Zvonareva, actually sent Maria packing in her round of sixteen encounter.

With the fields equally disrupted by the loss of both of last year's champions, the PacLife got a new lease on life for fan interest. Sure, for days people wrung their hands and suggested the world had come to an end. Why play the event if the best players don't actually win? Where does the fault lie? Were they unprepared or overly self-confident?

As fans adjusted to this brave new day, a variety of new players previously overlooked came to the fore and on the men's side, a couple of teenagers named Andy Murray of Scotland and Novak Djokovic of Serbia, who surprisingly made the final, tangled with the household names of Andy Roddick and Rafa.

Most of the talk by the hometown crowd related to the meeting of Roddick-Nadal in one of the semis. A meeting that will likely be repeated after Miami, when the USA meets Spain in Davis Cup play April 6-8. A similar result is in the cards for Roddick as Andy appeared crestfallen in defeat, apparently unable to effectively challenge the world's #2 player.

The other semi introduced the talented Djokovic to a wider audience unfamiliar with the latest new entrant to the top of the rankings at #10. Andy Murray, were it not for injuries suffered in the quarters against Tommy Haas, might have taken that same ranking spot with a semi-final win over Djokovic but that was not to be this time out. There will be a next time though, as both players are rapidly improving their game with a mixture of abundant skills and a willingness to employ winning strategies.

Nevertheless, a refreshed Nadal was far too much for anyone short of Federer and it is safe to assume that Rafa is back in top form and the Federer-Nadal rivalry is what 2007 will be concerned with at each and every Tour stop. Everyone else is playing second fiddle to these two all round players with developed games that their distant followers can only dream to eventually possess.

It appears one can make the top 10, without having all the strokes and or physical attributes, but the top positions go to those who can adapt to their opponents and change a losing formula into a winning approach. For 2007, only two players have shown that aptitude and ability.

On the women's side, after Maria's exit, a similar inevitable belief that Kuznetsova would run the table was prevalent. The overlooked factor in this draw's eventual outcome was the resurgence of Daniela Hantuchova, the 2002 PacLife Champion, who in that match triumphed over then reigning #1, Martina Hingis. At that time, the unknown Hantuchova surprised more than the confident Swiss Miss. Daniela emerged as a real contender on Tour, or so most fans believed at the time.

There was to follow, however, in Hantuchova's career a startling streak of 123 tournaments before she would revisit the winners circle and as fate would have it, her return to the Championship glory is right back in the California desert where her career first blossomed to the public's attention.

An unusual side note to the journey was that in 2002, when Hantuchova won the title, she was coached by an Englishman, Nigel Sears, who was asked back then, why are you coaching a Slovakian? His answer elicited giggles, when he replied, "Have you seen the English women?"

In 2007, coach Sears is back at home guiding the U.K.'s LTA's high performance program with those same English women he disparaged at the earlier point in time and Daniela with a new Spanish coach is holding aloft the very same trophy from years of yore.

Another coincidence was that both Kuznetsova and Hantuchova are coached by Spaniards from the Sanchez-Casal Academy in Barcelona, Spain. An incentive arrangement between the coaches to heighten the stakes on the outcome of this PacLife encounter was spurred on enthusiastically by their charges.

That additional carrot was that in order show their full dedication to supporting the imposing task at hand, the coaches would also meet in veritable hors de combat on court and be guided by their more competent students in a match in which both Svetlana and Daniela expect fitness to be a key factor in the outcome. They expect that they will recall their coaches' oral encouragement and similarly voice their learned support in the eagerly anticipated rematch of these two camps.

All in all, a change is often better than a rest and both Tours benefited from the outcomes in Indian Wells at the PacLife Championships. If the Sony-Ericsson in Miami is as fortunate, maybe tennis will be less predictable and captivate fans to a greater degree with the element of surprise.

Maybe? Then again NO!

Roger and Rafael Nadal are the cream of the crop on the men's side. The competition from the other members of the top ten is barely even visible on the horizon.

On the WTA Tour, there is always the element of surprise represented by the periodic return of Serena and Venus to action. Unseeded, as they often are due to lack of playing time, they can never be counted out of contention, even though, the likes of Henin, Clijsters in her final season and Maria are most regularly seen battling each other for supremacy.