

Marat Safin powers past Canada's Frank Dancevic, 7/5, 7/6(5), 7/6(7) in first round encounter

by Rick Angus
New York City

In the Big Apple, the core of this match, between up and coming Frank Dancevic of Canada and established ATP Tour regular and two time Grand Slam champion Russian Marat Safin, was power makes all the difference.

In an 11 o'clock morning curtain raiser in Louis Armstrong Stadium, the emphasis by both players was placed simply on brute strength. Each player tried to hit the pivotal ace or the angled forehand to their opponents rumoured weaker side, the backhand.

The Dancevic strategy appeared to be working well for the first two sets even though Frank was trailing in the match as he remained within striking distance until the second set tiebreaker.

Given Frank's lead at 5 games to 3 in the second, the match appeared to be approaching all even. In the ninth game, Frank contributed to his own eventual demise by matching Safin's careless play with a double fault and two volley errors to give Marat the break to equalize the set.

In the tiebreaker that followed, the tension built to a climax when after each player traded four mini break points, Dancevic served to arrive at 6 points all. This is when Safin picked that particular moment to crush a wide Dancevic serve to his forehand for an outright passing shot winner to end the comeback 7 points to 5, and with it the set, 7 games to 6.

The third set combined obvious disappointment displayed by Frank in his demeanour and reluctance by Safin to finish off his opponent quickly. After exchanging breaks of Dancevic in games four and Safin broken back in game five, the set continued to five games all.

Now was the critical moment, it seemed. Dancevic broke Safin at love and Marat looked to have gone walkabout, a fourth set was now inevitable. Frank, however, had second thoughts about the direction of the match and promptly fell behind early on his serve resulting in the players heading to a second consecutive tie breaker to resolve the match.

Marat took the first mini break point at 2-1 and was in control until Frank won four points in succession and five out of six to arrive at a set point in his favour, 6 points to

4. A return winner by Safin coupled with a return error by Frank led to an extended contest deadlocked at 6 points all.

Three successive points were resolved by player error but on his second match point opportunity Safin made no mistake, pounding an ace to close out Frank's dream of winning in his debut US Open tournament experience.

After the match, Frank gathered his thoughts and explained succinctly,

“I fought well. It was a high quality match and I had my opportunities. He played well when he needed to in the breakers. Marat was returning well, then I hit a wide serve and he came up with a great shot when he really needed it. He was hitting it pretty hard today, I didn't have that many opportunities to get to the net.”

“Last year, I probably would have lost 6/2, 6/2, 6/2. Marat did lose his focus in the 2nd and 3rd sets but I just didn't take advantage of those opportunities.”

“Now I am off to Asia next, play some tournaments and work on my game. A lot of things come with a top 100 ranking. I had two good tournaments this summer, but I haven't proven that I belong here, yet. It felt pretty cool though to get some recognition in another country. The noisy fan support was likely mostly Canadians, but I have no regrets about this week.”

“Now, I go back home and go fishing, take a couple of days off from the grind. My goal at the end of this year is to be top 50 and get ready for the Australian Open in 2008”

Safin concurred with Frank's assessment, “I was a little bit nervous coming into the match because the guy was playing pretty well the last two months. He had great results. He was solid in Indianapolis and Montreal and confident coming here. I have never played against him. It's a first round, so he has nothing to lose. Anything can happen.”

While the Safin and Dancevic result was close on the scorecard, digging deeper into the statistics uncovers the difference and what permitted Marat to advance to the second round. Both players depended upon serving prowess, but Safin hit 19 aces to Dancevic's 9. While the percentages on winners to errors were similar, Marat hit 44 winners to Frank's 33 and made a similarly high number of errors. 39 to 33 respectively.

If you ignore Safin's six chances to break Dancevic in the first set, the match became truly tight in the second and third sets where both competitors had numerous openings. Frank made three out of six break points count, whereas Marat profited from 3 out of 5 chances.

The conclusion:

Dancevic is on the bubble as far as the ATP Tour is concerned. Hopefully, Frank will encounter a more uplifting fate in future draws such as has not currently been the norm. Frank's 2007 experience has involved meeting Grand Slam champions at every turn.

Rest assured, the world is about to hear a lot more from the Canadian from Niagara Falls than simply the familiar lament about talent flourishing on the edge of an imminent breakthrough to stardom.

Dancevic is at a stage in his career where his game dictates that he belongs. 2008 will become, in all likelihood, his make or break year on tour.