

Five Setters becoming Commonplace in Early Rounds

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As the 2007 US Open begins to percolate into a real maelstrom of tennis conflicts, the matches are beginning to reflect the hard fought competition and provide the necessary suspense quotient demanded by the huge crowds of die-hard fans who have flocked to fill the grounds at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Centre at Flushing Meadow, N.Y. during the first week of play.

Each day, the draws on paper may make the early round match-ups appear less than entertaining, even maybe predictable. However, that is why they actually play the matches. Yesterday, Andy Murray struggled mightily to suppress a last hurrah from Jonas Bjorkman, the 35 year old ageing Swede, 5-7 6-3 6-1 4-6 6-1.

To finish off the day's activities in like style, American James Blake battled another senior citizen of the ATP circuit, Fabrice Santoro, a 34 year old Frenchman, 6-4 3-6 6-2 4-6 6-4. By entering this year's event, Fabrice tied the long serving and returning Andre Agassi as players who have entered the most Grand Slams in their careers. Both have amassed the phenomenal achievement of playing in 61 events.

One thing is sure it takes an early start in the professional ranks to permit such an accumulation of results in one man's tennis travels and to maintain such consistency for so long, certainly it is no mean feat.

Friday, the trend was exacerbated with clearly the outstanding match of the 2007 Open so far. This contest pitted the newest bright light in men's tennis, 20 year old Novak Djokovic against a resurgent Radek Stepanek who is recovering from a serious injury last August in Toronto that has dramatically affected his 2007 ranking.

Stepanek had a dislocated disc in his neck which cut the nerve to his hand. Radek lost the feel, power and touch in his right hand. This affliction caused him to seek the opinion of five separate doctors. But in the end, the risk from surgery was too great for him to follow that route. One doctor recommended the wait and see approach, which Stepanek ultimately chose.

Radek relied upon rest and rehab and mental patience which, combined with the coaching assistance of former Czech great Petr Korda, propelled his comeback to the top tier of tennis. Hampered by his fall in the rankings due to inactivity, Radek has assembled results to date in 2007 that prove undoubtedly that Radek is one tough hombre.

As an aside, Radek's dalliance as the significant emotional partner of Martina Hingis gave him celebrity status that elicited far more public attention than his solid tennis game for the past year. In today's battle for tennis supremacy on this day, the fans came out on top and tennis was surely the only focus of their rapt attention.

After a five set encounter which took over four and three quarter hours, Djokovic kept his legitimate aspirations to reach and win a Grand Slam final intact. It surely wasn't a walk in Corona Park, the site of this U.S. Open, but Novak did triumph 6-7(4) 7-6(5) 5-7 7-5 7-6(2). Repeatedly, the crowd responded to the true talent and athleticism of the participants with standing O's.

If one questions the price of admission charged for the early rounds, which normally is a hot topic hereabouts, today silenced many of those critics. Especially pleased were the rail birds holding court at the bars and concession stands. The chief topic of conversation in those environs was, how do they do that? Punctuated time and again by gasps mixed with applause, the fans rewarded the honest and fulsome efforts displayed by both Djokovic and Stepanek.