

THE NEXT POINT ANNUAL 2011



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Introduction

2011 was Novak Djokovic's year.

The story for the first nine months was that he won everything, across three continents and at all levels. In doing so he achieved the No.1 ranking, and once and for all tore apart the duopoly that had controlled men's tennis for half a decade. The story for the last two months was that he stopped winning – we'd all become habituated to it – and the supplementary debate over where his season therefore fit in the scheme of the greatest ever. Consensus seems to place it third, behind Federer's 2006 and Laver's 1969. Despite a flaccid finale, it's right up there.

The strangest aspect of Djokovic's titanic year was not the manner of its unfolding, for once underway, the internal logic grew so compelling that even by Indian Wells the question was raised of how he could realistically lose. No, the most astonishing thing was that it came from nowhere. Djokovic had been the third best player in world for four years, and 2010 had ended in a flurry of largely unremarkable losses to Federer and Nadal (he went 1-6 against them after Wimbledon). He was undoubtedly imposing in winning Serbia's first Davis Cup, but he'd only faced down a second-rate French squad. There was simply no way to know what was coming. Talk of gluten-free diets and magical hyperbaric pods came later, but never served to complete the picture. Somehow, it just all came together in Australia, and didn't come unstuck until October.

As it had been for years, the talk as the players trickled into Melbourne was of the top two. Nadal claimed three consecutive majors in 2010, the first man to do so since Laver. He was the world No.1, and would achieve the 'Rafa Slam' with victory in Melbourne. Meanwhile, Federer ended the season in scathing form, taking his fifth title at the tour finals with wins over Nadal, Djokovic, Murray, Soderling and Ferrer for the loss of a single set. He claimed the warm-up in Doha. They were the runaway favourites for the Australian Open.

Djokovic's campaign commenced some weeks earlier at the Hopman Cup, in Perth, with an entirely forgettable match against Andrey Golubev. The Serbian opened slowly, but eventually prevailed in three sets. It was an utterly inconsequential

encounter, and indeed being an exhibition event it does not even figure on the official record. Nevertheless, Djokovic would not lose until May, ironically falling one match short of equalling McEnroe's 27 year old record for best ever season beginning.

This match is useful, however, for it reminds us that other things happened besides Djokovic this year. Golubev would go on to post his own heroic streak, by losing 18 consecutive matches, just three short of the record set by Vince Spadea. No one saw that coming, either, although of course no one was looking. The lesson in both cases, as in so many others, is that it is impossible to anticipate sudden change. Few anticipated Milos Raonic's ascent, except perhaps the man himself. Certainly no one predicted that Alex Bogomolov might finish at No.34, *including* the man himself.

In compiling this Annual, the temptation is not inconsiderable to appear knowing about these trends afterwards and prescient about them beforehand. The season has its own shape, and to imply that it therefore had a pre-ordained narrative that I'd somehow divined would require only simple editing. A nipped phrase here, and a tucked prediction there . . . But what would be the point? Far better to leave these pieces mostly untouched, that they may retain some of the delight and surprise I felt while writing it. Consequently, the only editorial effort has been to fix the most embarrassing grammatical errors and solecisms, which in my defence were mostly committed due to exhaustion. As an Australian fan, I am used to enjoying tennis in the very small hours of the night, but I wasn't used to writing about it afterwards.

It has been quite a ride. Thank you for reading.

Jesse Pentecost

Melbourne, December 2011.

The Australian Summer (January)

Tremendous Ball Striking

Hopman Cup

Djokovic d. Golubev, 4/6 6/3 6/1

Anthony Hudson began his post-match interview with Serbia's sweat-slicked Ana Ivanovic by declaring 'You're looking pretty hot', and it only grew more awkward from there. Positively radiant from exertion, victory and genetics – although not in that order – she is doubtless accustomed to strong men developing gallant stammers as they gain proximity. For my wife's sake I lambasted Hudson's effort as roundly as she, but privately I conceded that I would probably fare no better.

Ivanovic's beauty is not of the haunting variety, which isn't to say that it doesn't stay with you. The lingering effects might explain why her compatriot Novak Djokovic began his match so distractedly, pushing and prodding while his opponent Andrey Golubev carved and blasted.

For the first set we at home were treated to the commentary stylings of Lleyton Hewitt, who was determined to point out whenever he could that Golubev is a 'tremendous striker of the ball'. I cannot say for certain if Hewitt was more impressed by Golubev's skills, or the phrase itself. Down a set, Djokovic picked it up a few notches and began to strike some tremendous balls of his own, clearing out whatever cobwebs had accrued in the short weeks since the Davis Cup final. By the third set Golubev wasn't striking the ball very tremendously at all and Hewitt had long since fled the premises. Djokovic romped home.

Diverting Grotesqueries

Brisbane International, First Round

Stepanek d. Kamke, 5/7 6/1 6/4

Becker d. Verdasco, 6/1 6/7 6/4

If one were to compile a crib sheet on Radek Stepanek - who today saw off the sporadically promising Tobias Kamke in three sets - there are three important things to know:

1. He is unorthodox and aggressive, with strangely effective strokes, capable volleys and excellent court sense.
2. He was once engaged to Martina Hingis and is now married to Nicole Vaidisova, despite being the least fetching male tennis player since Petr Korda. Now that is punching above your weight.
3. Like Korda, he embodies a rich tradition in Czech tennis of wearing disturbingly horrible t-shirts, a tradition that stretches back at least to Ivan Lendl. 2010 saw Stepanek in some humdingers, surpassed only by Srdjan Djokovic at the US Open.

Quite aside from an entertaining tennis match, I was curious to see what new sartorial travesty Stepanek might unleash in Brisbane. I was hoping for something memorably hideous, so you can imagine my disappointment at discovering the match would not be televised. Instead, the featured encounter saw Fernando Verdasco facing Benjamin Becker. Frustratingly, it was looking very much like I'd have to write about actual tennis. But then the players appeared on court, and I saw what was on Verdasco's head.

Verdasco's monumental semifinal against Rafael Nadal at the 2009 Australian Open was astonishing for any number of reasons, not least of which was the fact that even after five hours of solid exertion and litres of sweat, not a hair of his 'faux-mo' had broken formation. Undoubtedly Verdasco took a lot from this match besides confidence in his choice of hair product. However, despite oscillating form over the past 24 months, his hair style has been the one constant: his hair-helmet has been his rock, his armour. It wasn't broke - clearly it's unbreakable - so why try to fix it?

For whatever reason, try he did. Gone is the rigid, glistening faux-mo. In its place is an actual mo, and not a good one. There's doubtless a Samson metaphor lurking somewhere in the mix. After Verdasco's erratic loss today, it would not be inappropriate.

I sometimes wonder whether tennis commentators really do have a crib sheet before them, listing all the essential points they must cover during the call; three or four fun facts about each player, an explanation of how tie-breaks work, that a ball landing on the very outside of the line is still in, that players cannot sit down after the first game of a set, the challenge system, why players synchronise their racquet changes with the ball changes and Ivan Lendl's role in instigating this practice. I'm genuinely amazed by their patience. Surely saying it for the thousandth time is even less fun than hearing it. How does, say, Robbie Koenig not claw his eyes out as Jason Goodall asks *yet again* whether he thinks Roger Federer hiring Paul Annacone was a good move? I think I've deduced what's on their crib sheet for Benjamin Becker:

1. He is not related to Boris Becker. Apparently that cannot be stressed enough.
2. He was the guy up the other end in Andre's Agassi's final tennis match.

Beating Fernando Verdasco is not a sufficiently monumental achievement to merit inclusion in this list. It was a fine win, to be sure, but mohawk or not, Verdasco just isn't that big a scalp these days.

Ponderous Levity

Hopman Cup

Murray d. Mahut 7/6 7/6

Lleyton Hewitt was back in the commentary booth last night, and so was 'tremendous ball striking'. But that wasn't the strangest thing he said. Invited to analyse his loss to Novak Djokovic – in which he went down 6/2 6/4 – Hewitt waxed earnest on how extremely well he'd struck the ball, how extremely well he'd moved, how extremely well he'd competed. ('Extremely well' is clearly a verbal tic for Hewitt, a catch-all suffix whose relentless use nonetheless reflects his determination to have

nothing but kind things to say, even about himself. Murray was 'moving extremely well'. Mahut was 'competing extremely well'. Both of them were 'striking the ball extremely well'. Sadly, 'extremely well' precludes the use of 'tremendous'.) This is despite the fact that Hewitt won exactly half as many games as Djokovic, and that despite earning a fistful of break points, it wasn't especially close. If he'd made his comments before the match, then been cleaned up 2 and 4, the irony might have been poignant. Coming afterwards, it was just a little deluded. Hewitt, a veteran whom the race has outrun, is coming to seem less Learesque in his impotence, and more like Don Quixote, or Eddie the Eagle.

This unintended irony persisted even after Hewitt left. There's an affliction known as the Commentator's Curse, whereby complimenting a player on an aspect of their game will inspire an immediate if temporary drop in execution. For example, pointing out that someone is serving well might produce a double fault. Following Hewitt's example, Paul McNamee and Josh Eagle set out to confound this specious causality. A Murray double fault provoked the (non-ironic) statement that he was serving well. A 27 stroke rally that Murray concluded by meekly dumping a sliced backhand into the net inspired Eagle to remark on how much variety Murray brought to the game, how effective he was at changing paces. Even McNamee found this confusing, although not as confusing as his subsequent remark: 'Yes, 27 shot rally. He's world No.4.'

Otherwise, the commentary was about what you'd expect. A mishit winner from Mahut produced a perfunctory apology from the Frenchman, which in turn inspired the standard ponderous levity from the commentators (Hewitt included): 'He's apologising, but I'll bet he'll take it. Hoho ho.' Hewitt might have pointed out that when players do this they aren't apologising, but conceding to their opponent that they won the point through good fortune. A clutch Murray serve to save break point was 'quality', while a Mahut forehand was 'class'. The missing word in both cases was 'high'. Applied to the commentary, however, the missing word was 'low'. One of Murray's backhands was struck 'extremely well' and with 'tremendous direction'.

The match itself was very good, and highly entertaining. Mahut can be up and down, a tendency French players apparently acquire at their mother's teat. He was only ever up until he had break points, or set points, but when he was up he was typically

engaging. He backspun one drop volley so sharply that it nearly returned to his side of the court. Josh Eagle was correct in highlighting just how impressive it was. Twice Mahut ended up on Murray's side of the court. The second time he nearly took the Scotsman out, but it was all in good fun. Murray tried a tweener like the one Federer hit in Doha the other night, but found the tape.

Tactically Sound

Brisbane International, Semifinal

Soderling d. Stepanek, 6/3 7/5

Whichever media genius came up with the idea of accosting players as they're heading out on to court has a lot to answer for. The intention, apparently, is to help the viewers identify better with the players. In order for this to happen, the broadcasters have striven mightily to create a situation in which nothing of interest will ever be said, except by accident, and even then only by the woefully under-qualified interviewer. Observe today's probing effort, as Robin Soderling was about to go out on court for his semifinal with Radek Stepanek: "Now, you've been serving extremely well, and haven't been broken so far this week. Do you plan on using that tactically in your match today?" It's the kind of fatuity that drinking games are constructed around. The gales of laughter that erupted in our lounge room unfortunately drowned out Soderling's patiently distracted reply. It is a testament to his softly-spoken professionalism that he didn't collapse into a mirthful heap himself.

Elite sportspeople are mostly inured to stupidity. The fluff piece aired by Channel 7 directly before the match demonstrated why it's important that they are. After a cringe-inducing intro - "I haven't picked up a tennis racquet since high school! Who better to give me some lessons than world No.5 Robin Soderling and his coach?!" - we were treated to the world No.5 feeding balls (left-handed) to the vivacious reporter, while his coach Claudio Pistolesi quoted da Vinci at her.

Once the semifinal commenced, it wasn't long before the probing question was answered. Soderling seemed to be tactically deploying that serve of his with startling regularity, about every second game in fact. He essayed various approaches with it,

but personally I thought the serves that went in were the best. He clearly thought so, too, and mostly stuck with that. Then Geoff Masters - commentating with John Fitzgerald - went and blew my mind by offering an insightful analysis of Soderling's serve. Focusing on the Swede's unusual grip, he demonstrated how it limits the Swede's capacity to deliver effective sliding serves. His slider doesn't slide. Graphics proved useful - another first for tennis coverage - proving that Soderling's deliveries to the right-hander's forehand lack both curve and placement, and that what effectiveness they boast is due to raw power.

As it happened, raw power was enough to get by Radek Stepanek in a match that only came alive in its final minutes, when the Czech finally broke back as Soderling served for it. He successfully whipped the Queensland crowd into some kind of frenzy - no mean feat in itself - although the effect was rather undone when he was immediately broken again. Having learned from his mistake, Soderling returned to serving tactically (i.e. hard and in), and held to love.

Soderling meets defending champion Andy Roddick in tomorrow's final. If he wins he'll move up to No.4. This would relegate Andy Murray to No.5, a brutal quarterfinal prospect for someone in Melbourne.

Overload

Qatar Open

Any hope that Doha might provide a clear form-guide ahead of the Australian Open was frustrated by Rafael Nadal's illness. The tribal zealots are of course over-analysing it, which is a kind way of saying they're incapable of any analysis at all. When you hold a hammer, so the saying goes, all you see are nails. With brains of iron, the outlook is basically the same. Faceless chumps who actively wish bodily harm on their forum-peers presume to condemn a slightly tepid handshake following Nadal's semifinal loss. Unquestionably he was unwell. The real question will be how profoundly it affects this most meticulously prepared of athletes.

Otherwise, we discovered that Roger Federer is a better player than Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, although the Frenchman is coming back from injury, having severely ruptured whichever ligament enables him to return serve. Federer's awkward win over boyhood chum Marco Chiudinelli proved that even the great man can be temporarily handicapped by 'feelings'. We found out that Nikolay Davydenko can overwhelm an ailing Nadal. The way he was connecting – very hard and very early – suggested he might overwhelm a healthy Nadal, but we just can't know for sure. Nonetheless, it's fair to say Davydenko was back to his old self, which meant he was no match for Federer in full flight. On this surface, who is? The Swiss now has his 67th career title, and his fourth from the past five tournaments. He certainly has momentum heading to Melbourne, unlike last year when he lost in the Doha semifinals, then blitzed his way to a 16th major.

Brisbane International

There is apparently some debate about whether the Pat Rafter Arena is an indoor or outdoor venue. Insofar as it matters either way, surely this issue can now be put to rest. Indoor arenas tend not to allow the outside in. Pat Rafter Arena kept letting the Queensland monsoon in at the sides, which seems fairly conclusive to me. It also provided Andy Roddick with the excuse to blow his top in the final. Down a set, looking out-muscled, it was almost on cue. The squeamish thing about Roddick's increasingly predictable dummy-spits is not their severity, nor even their length. It's their pettiness; the way he *quibbles*. The latest instalment saw him take issue with umpire Fergus Murphy's technique for testing the slipperiness of the court surface. A worldwide television audience was treated to a lengthy disquisition on the matter. Even Robin Soderling – with as vested an interest as anyone – gave up on it, and buried his head in a towel.

The most important result of the indoor-outdoor debate (as it will be whisperingly dubbed by later generations), was that this is Soderling's first outdoor title. The rangy Swede is now world No.4, meaning he'll receive a slightly better draw in Melbourne. The corollary is that Murray at No.5 will have a slightly worse one, as will the poor sod that draws him in the quarterfinals. There's no telling what will happen. Last year it was Nadal, and his knee exploded.

Lessons learned: Smug entitlement does not a committed Bernard Tomic make. He's since fought through qualifying in Sydney, and looks ten times more imposing. Fernando Verdasco taught us that a change is not as good as a haircut, especially a goddamn awful haircut. For Radek Stepanek, purple is the new kak.

Hopman Cup

The thing the Hopman Cup does better than any other event is make the players seem like human beings. This is not an inconsiderable achievement, and those involved are rightly proud. As an invitation event it has the luxury of a small draw. Scheduling allows it to welcome the players with a grand New Year's Eve ball. There's a pro-am golf thing, and a welter of TV fluff-pieces (treating us to, say, Tommy Robredo knocking up paella). Amidst all this bonhomie, there is the odd tennis match, though these too evince an infectious *joie de vivre*, even the men's singles. Nicolas Mahut saw to that.

The great disappointment was that the hoped for encounter between Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray never materialised. Theirs is a rivalry that has never been, two high-quality players whose trajectories are restricted to near-perfect parallel by the greats above them. That might change in Melbourne. The other disappointment, if only for the promoters and idiots, was that the anticipated Isner-Mahut rematch proved rather shorter than their last run-in.

Lesson learned: The only thing that can upstage Bethanie Mattek-Sands in full get-out is Nicolas Mahut in a snug frock. It would be easy to be snide about this – drag isn't my bag – but it was pulled off with such dead-pan Gallic aplomb that I couldn't help but be amused.

Chennai Open

Chennai was won by a gradually-improving Stanislas Wawrinka, which tells you something about how he's bounced back from divorce. In the final he overcame world No.60 Xavier Malisse, whose No.7 seeding tells you plenty about the depth of the Chennai field. Tomas Berdych – the thirtieth best player in the world who is somehow ranked No.6 – was top seed.

In a week with four tournaments running concurrently, it was probably inevitable that one of them would be a dud, and that Chennai would be it. Notwithstanding all the work the ATP is putting into China, it seems obvious that there's a vital market going untapped in India. The country deserves a higher profile event, one less overshadowed by Qatari petro-dollars or the Hopman Cup love-in.

More Sizzle

Auckland, Quarterfinals

Nalbandian d. Isner, 6/4 7/6

Insofar as disparate gatherings of strangers can boast anything beyond a tendency to wildly applaud any celebrity pledging self-reform, tennis crowds often boast distinct personalities. It is frequently remarked upon during the US and French Opens, but almost never at lesser events. The crowd at the ASB Tennis Centre in Auckland is an excitable one. Anything even slightly out of the ordinary - dead net cord, miss-hit, stray seagull - is guaranteed to elicit an ooh or an ahh. Aces are met with gasps, even when it is John Isner serving. As an Australian, it is easy for me to sound condescending about this, but I don't mean to. In thrall to the tyranny of geography, New Zealand is pretty starved for top-shelf sport, even in cosmopolitan Auckland. The venue itself is intimate, leafy and atmospheric; the pricey seats at one end are laid out around tables, and there is a constant chink of glassware. 'A Horse With No Name' played at one change of ends. The coverage owes a debt to Terry Gilliam.

The stream I watched had no commentary, which is generally no bad thing, though I did vaguely yearn for someone to buttress my belief that David Nalbandian is the worst great tennis player I have ever seen. Given the relative ease with which he was returning Isner's serve - he should be one of the great returners, but usually isn't - there was no facet of the game in which Nalbandian should not have been dominant. Yet the scoreline was what it was. Of course, Isner's efforts to shore up his ground game have been laudable. His forehand is a fearsome weapon. But this is Nalbandian, for god's sake, who can trade blows with the greats at their greatest.

His strokes are so compact, so fluid. His movement is so efficient. It all looks so *functional*. I am reminded of Mark Twain's assertion that Wagner's music is better than it sounds, if only the formulation. David Nalbandian's tennis is worse than it looks. Still, he won. Tomorrow's semifinal against Nicolas Almagro should feature, to quote a word-smith not quite on par with Twain, some 'tremendous ball striking'.

Sydney, Quarterfinal

Troicki d. Gasquet, 6/4 6/4

The last time I featured Richard Gasquet and Nalbandian in the same post, it was on a day when the Frenchman went down to Viktor Troicki. Now it has happened again. It's curious how that happens, how the orbiting bodies in the tennis cosmos will occasionally clump together in strange configurations. It is most noticeable when players who have hitherto collided only rarely suddenly run afoul of each other every week. (Last May, Roger Federer hadn't encountered Alejandro Falla since the 2006 French Open. Then, randomly, there he was three tournaments running. Given that he knew precisely what to expect, it was little wonder Federer looked so complacent on that first morning at Wimbledon.)

This was Troicki's 100th ATP victory, and his 11th since almost toppling Rafael Nadal in the Tokyo semifinal last October. Since then he has improved his ranking 24 places to No.30 (it will climb higher again after this week), bagged his first title (Moscow) and clinched the deciding rubber in the Davis Cup final. Throughout that period his only losses have been to Federer, Novak Djokovic, and Rainer Schuettler (which we can safely explain away as the not uncommon let-down many suffer upon capturing their maiden title). The capacity to beat those you should beat is a key way of determining whether your ranking is a correct reflection of your ability, and not merely the result of sporadic inspiration or luck. He isn't particularly flashy, and he has a weird serve and the eyes of a lunatic, but Troicki deserves to be where he is.

Ratcheting Up the Aggro

Australian Open Qualifying, Second Round

Jones d. Bozoljac, 7/6 6/7 10/8

It would be inaccurate to say this second round Qualifying match had no atmosphere. It had some, although whatever vibe it did scrounge up was in spite of Serbia's Ilija Bozoljac, who for three long sets only ever stopped glowering at the crowd long enough to remonstrate with the umpire. It was a warmish day, and some in attendance were inclined to shift in their seats from time to time, or take a sip of water. These, it transpires, are glarable offences. One poor kid had a balloon. You can imagine the ire this provoked. In between compiling a mental catalogue of how he'd like to deal with each and every one of those in attendance, Bozoljac also had stern words for a medical timeout, and grew increasingly outraged that none of his opponent's shots landing near the lines were called long. To be fair, some of those shots were probably almost out.

I've only seen Bozoljac play once before, when he took a set from Roger Federer in the second round of last year's Wimbledon. I don't recall him carrying on the same way back then, even though Centre Court at the All England Club boasts considerably more spectators to get offended by. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that his behaviour today stemmed from a lack of respect, for his opponent and for his situation. Strange behaviour for someone who primarily earns his crusts on the Challenger circuit, where there is no Hawkeye and often no crowd. It was exasperating to watch, and several times I was on the verge of descending wrathfully to the court and doling out a piece of my mind, but propriety stopped me. Propriety and the fact that Bozoljac is 6'4" and looked mad as a cut snake.

In the circumstances, Greg Jones' composure was impressive. He paid his opponent no heed whatsoever. If he had, and if he was that kind of person, he might have tried ratcheting up the aggro a little: a delay here, a rambunctious 'C'mon' there. He's clearly not that kind of person, though he did manage a measured 'C'mon' when he broke back as Bozoljac served for it. The crowd promptly summoned a belligerent cheer, its numbers now sufficient to feel confident that it would overcome Bozoljac if

it came to blows. Nine games later, serving at 8/9, and 0-40, Bozoljac submitted with a petulant double fault.

Jones, who eked out his first round match 9/7 in the final set, has earned passage to the third round. There he'll discover top seed Blaz Kavcic waiting.

He Snap In the Head

Australian Open, First Round

Monfils d. de Bakker, 6/7 2/6 7/5 6/2 6/1

I switched on the TV at a seemingly opportune moment, as the coverage cut from a yawn-fest on Rod Laver Arena to an intriguing men's match on Hisense. Serving at 5/6 in the first set, desperate to force a tiebreak, Thiemo de Bakker sealed the hold with a terrific forehand up the line past a stranded Gael Monfils, punctuating it with a roar of self-appreciation. Tiebreak time! This was naturally the broadcaster's cue to return to the 'action' on Rod Laver, where Maria Sharapova was going to terrific lengths to squander a commanding lead. 'She's really pulling off on a lot of balls here,' remarked Kerryn Pratt, evocatively. The issue, primarily, was double-faults: 'As a professional athlete, she needs to be aware that these serves aren't clearing the net'.

Back on Hisense, de Bakker went on to take that first set, and the second for good measure. For even better measure, he broke in the third, and stepped up to serve it out at 5/3. Monfils was in so much trouble that even he was aware of it. In case we at home weren't: 'Monfils is in real trouble here.' I'd like to claim it was dry British understatement, but it was just home-grown Aussie silence-filler. In any case, it turned out the Frenchman was in rather less trouble than we'd thought, as de Bakker produced the worst service game since Sharapova about twenty minutes earlier. Monfils broke back, then broke again to take the set. He won the last couple going away.

The Dutchman's mental lacerations were severe, and, based on the pronounced limp he suddenly developed, apparently gouged out part of his motor cortex. It is the

first time Monfils has recovered from a two set deficit. Asked about it afterwards, he remarked of his opponent: 'I know Thiemo a bit. I know sometime he snap in the head. So this is like a strong belief. We know like he can snap. It's a weakness for him. So you play with that.' It turns out Gael Monfils *does* have an inner game, and a penchant for calling kettles black.

Dimitrov d. Golubev, 6/1 6/4 6/2

The latest man to be burdened with the epithet 'Baby Federer' - it's worked out so well for Richard Gasquet - Grigor Dimitrov today proved the adage that surviving a tough Qualifying draw builds character. We could also say that a brutal Qualifying draw can be brutalising in its turn, which might better explain the rough hiding he duly inflicted on poor Andrey Golubev, who'd had every right to be relieved at drawing a qualifier first up.

As this match took place on an outer paddock court, it was not televised. Dimitrov next meets Stanislas Wawrinka, which will almost certainly occur on a show court. The Swiss No.2 is made of sterner stuff, but he will find little consolation in the 'Q' next to his opponent's name. Even if he loses, Dimitrov should now move into the top 100, and at just 19 will become the highest ranked Bulgarian male player in history.

The Jingos

Australian Open, First Round

(10) Youzhny d. Ilhan, 6/2 6/3 7/6

Armed with the day's schedule, a map of the grounds, and some marker pens, the family beside me - I dubbed them the Jingos - were laboriously charting their course through Day 2 of the Australian Open. No Australian was too obscure to make the itinerary. (Marinko Matosevic? Check. Matthew Ebden? Bring it on.) No one else was too famous to be cut from it. (Andy Murray? *Gone*.) I stole a glance at the completed diagram, criss-crossed with arrows. It would be tight, but so long as they didn't stop to either relieve or enjoy themselves, they might just pull it off. Mother Jingo handed out a sheet of Australian flag decals for the children to adorn themselves with. Drill-

sergeant Dad Jingo gave them the once-over, securing the youngest girl's cape more securely.

The official television broadcaster Channel 7 has come to the patriotic party. Amongst abundant promos highlighting the heroic role they've played in filming other people in adversity, they're not opposed to showing the odd tennis match. Their latest initiative is to display a little Australian flag next to the name of every Australian player, so that viewers may better forge a connection with people they might not otherwise recognise. Few can forget the mayhem at last year's Australian Open, when some fans started booing Bernard Tomic, thinking him a foreigner, or a prat. At least this year we can be sure they're booing him for the right reasons. In case you're wondering, the nationalities of other players are not displayed. Where they hail from is not important. It is enough to know they aren't from here.

I left the Jingo family constructing their jolly placards - 'GO AUSSIE ACE IT FOR QUEENSLAND!' - and made my way to the back-lot, where the world's tenth best tennis player was plying his trade on a remote court. Mikhail Youzhny's last Grand Slam match was a semifinal on a packed Arthur Ashe stadium. Here on Court 13, rail-lines adjacent, it seems the tournament was penalising him for not choosing the country of his birth more carefully. His opponent was Marsel Ilhan, Turkey's finest. As with many Mediterranean players, Ilhan has a vast and vocal Melbourne following, who enjoy nothing more than tightly-rehearsed slogans and beating their fists against resonant objects. They comprised about half of those present.

Aiming for parity, I seated myself in the Russian support section, which consisted of two old men, one in shiny track-pants, and the other in a shinier suit. They seemed friendly, and while the exhortations they bellowed at 'Misha' lacked the close harmony of their Turkish counterparts, it was heart-felt. Youzhny clearly appreciated it, and before long was directing his fist-pumps and roars our way. Watching Youzhny live is always a treat, especially from up close. He is a player's player. Lacking extravagant weaponry, you can see him actually thinking on court, carefully considering each point. That being said, he was slow to exploit Ilhan's obvious deficiency, which is a weird and cumbersome forehand preparation, one that sees him yield the baseline so as not to be rushed. Youzhny should have rushed it more, but he got there eventually.

(31) Lopez d. Falla, 6/3 7/6 6/3

(30) Bellucci d. Mello, 7/5 7/5 4/6 3/6 6/3

From there I swung by Feliciano Lopez and Alejandro Falla, who is the swarthiest man I've ever seen. It was as though he'd been dipped in it. As always, I was struck by the woodenness of Lopez' movement. Up close, he is not a natural, though he might just be dreamy enough to warrant the female attention he was receiving. Even prettier was the Brazilian 30th seed Thomaz Bellucci, who was battling compatriot Ricardo Mello on Court 19. Their country has been beset by floods, too. So far over 600 have lost their lives, and tens of thousands have been displaced. Unfortunately none of them have little Australian flags next to their names, and probably won't have a tennis benefit organised on their behalf. While Matthew Ebden failed to do it for Queensland or the Jingos on Margaret Court Arena, Bellucci fought through in five.

The Tomic Test

Australian Open, Second Round

Tomic d. (31) Lopez, 7/6 7/6 6/3

31st seed Feliciano Lopez today lost in straight sets to Bernard Tomic, who is ranked No.199 in the world. The Australian press has commemorated this result with characteristic composure. *The Age* dubbed the win 'A-Tomic', a headline that is at once obvious considering his surname, and misleading considering his pedestrian play style. The *Sydney Morning Herald* has opted for 'Weekend for Bernie: Giant-killer Tomic sets up clash with Nadal'. Cringe-worthy clumsiness aside, it's also not very accurate. Who realistically believes Lopez to be a giant? Whoever it is, they're hopefully revising their estimation downwards. Everyone else is.¹

If men's tennis boasts a hierarchy independent from simple rankings - and it assuredly does - then it has received a minor shake-up, although it isn't the one the Australian press fondly imagines. Tomic has earned the right to act like he belongs

¹*The Herald Sun*, which is to newspapers as *Fox News* is to sanity, was for a wonder the most circumspect in their headline: 'Bernard Tomic on road to redemption'. I was really hoping for something more like 'Day-Glo F-Lo Dealt Tomic Death-Blow'.

(but no more). Certain kinds of player should now be wary when they see him ahead in the draw (but no more). For Lopez, however, the damage is profound. It must be difficult to show your face after a loss like this, which goes hard on a guy like Lopez. Along with the bunched muscles in his thighs, his face is the thing he likes to show off most. He seems quite taken with it. After today's performance, you have to wonder if a pretty face is all he has. Lopez has now qualified for membership of that exclusive but growing club of men who have failed the Tomic Test.

There is a simple written test in which participants are instructed to read all the way to the end before answering anything. Many people ignore the initial instruction, and begin answering the laughably basic questions as they go, only to reach the end and discover that you aren't meant to answer anything at all. The point is to discover who is paying attention, and capable of following simple instructions. The only people who aren't caught out are those who take due care, or those who are too stupid not to.

I've touched before on the role that stupidity can play in the outcome of tennis matches, on how more consideration needs to be paid to idiocy as a determining factor. The Tomic Test is a basic task designed to see who is really paying attention, or who is just smart enough to fall into the trap of playing his game, but not smart enough to think their way out. Like an IQ test, failure can feel crushingly irrefutable. It isn't like you've lost to an inspired journeyman playing their heart out. No, it's exactly what it looks like: you've lost to some lumbering kid noodling the ball around.

The next player to undergo the Tomic Test will be Rafael Nadal, who always pays careful attention. For his last match, the world No.1 was backed in at \$1.01, odds that were overly generous to his opponent, a qualifier who played his heart out to grab four games. Hopefully not too many of my compatriots have had their brains scrambled by audacious headlines: patriotism standing revealed as fantasy. The only thing more foolish than losing to Tomic would be backing him against Nadal.

A Stuttering Stream

Australian Open, Third Round

Djokovic d. Troicki, 6/2 ret.

Roddick d. Haase, 2/6 7/6 6/2 6/2

It was really brought home to me today what a lottery buying tickets to the tennis is. At fifty bucks, a day in a roasting Hisense Arena appeared to be the hottest deal in town. First up: Novak Djokovic vs. Viktor Troicki. Second: Andy Roddick vs. Robin Haase. Some enticing third round prospects: mouths were watering, palms tingling, backs sweating. Stomach muscles were tearing. Unfortunately this last was Troicki, and at a set down he was obliged to give it away. Djokovic now joins Nadal and Murray in enjoying an early-round gimme. Federer zealots are livid. The fix is on! Their ire (which is infinite) is evenly apportioned between Craig Tiley, Uncle Toni, and the cosmos.

Spare some regard for the poor buggers baking in Hisense, whose coveted tickets had lost some cachet. Then Roddick and Haase strode from the tunnel. Dutch fans speak highly of Haase - whose professed hobbies include tennis and knee surgery - as do aficionados of 'tremendous ball striking'. At 0/1, he seemed to roll his ankle, and limped to his chair. The Hisense crowd was less sympathetic than it might have been. Then my stuttering internet stream expired.

I turned to my television, curious to hear its thoughts. Not much: commercial break, after which Channel 7 brought up that split court graphic they're currently so proud of, the one where they display all courts simultaneously, in real time. It lets you feel like you're manning the security station at a shopping mall, which is exactly what one looks for in tennis coverage. It does have the advantage of showing you just how much interesting stuff is going on outside of Rod Laver Arena, while inside it Caroline Wozniacki gradually ground down some diminutive hacker from the Eastern Bloc. Over on Hisense, Haase had expanded his breather into a full-blown medical time out. Sadly, the coverage stayed with Laver, which is a shame since I'll take a tight shot of a physio strapping an ankle over Wozniacki any day. Luckily, the stream reconnected, so I could.

Haase ambled gingerly onto court, held, and then broke Roddick twice, which you might have missed while Jim Courier argued at soporific length that the American is the greatest server in the universe. A clear disconnect between words and images, but blame the Dutchman. I was reminded that, once upon a time, big guys like this would rip through a slam draw, unheralded and unstoppable. It wasn't to be. Stuff like that doesn't happen anymore. Roddick is too professional, and the unheralded titans of this age are all basket cases.

Back on Rod Laver, and Justine Henin and Svetlana Kuznetsova were providing another reason to be thankful for the invention of the tiebreak: it means two players can only concede limp service breaks for so long before someone is forced to win the set, whether they like it or not. Despite her best efforts, Kuznetsova took the second. Luckily for her, she'd won the first, too. Henin is out. The torrent of audacious winners had almost entirely dried up on Hisense; only the merest trickle continued unchecked from Roddick's racquet. The whole thing had devolved into the kind of dour penance that Roddick insists he thrives on, and that his fans must by necessity tolerate. He's through. The draw now lacks Dutch men. Roger Federer and Xavier Malisse were not far off; a very tough afternoon for the Low Countries.

(2) Federer d. Malisse, 6/3 6/3 6/1

Federer and Malisse sauntered out onto court, a 'sliding doors' moment. They've been playing each other since they were 12. Now they're *ancient*. It has been about eight years since they've had much else in common, back when they were the next big things. There was a fork in the road, but only one of them turned right.

I wonder, does Federer ever see Malisse and think 'There but for the grace of God go I?' It's difficult to imagine. It's easier to imagine Malisse in a dodgy bar somewhere, conspiring with Tommy Haas to do Federer in.

Another Game for Milos!

Australian Open, Third Round

Raonic d. (10) Youzhny, 6/4 7/5 4/6 6/4

Now that he has defeated No.10 seed Mikhail Youzhny, Canada's young Milos Raonic can feasibly lay claim to being the story of the first week. Including Qualifying, it was his sixth straight victory at Melbourne Park.

Still only 20, he is a big man (6'5"), with a commensurate serve, an inclination to attack, and fine composure. For those who follow tennis only occasionally, he has sprung seemingly from nowhere. Those who follow it closer know he has sprung from Montenegro by way of Canada, and that his results over the past six months have been building to something notable. He reached the quarterfinals in Kuala Lumpur (l. to Andreev), and pushed Rafael Nadal in Tokyo. With compatriot Vasek Pospisil, he knocked off the dream-team of Nadal and Novak Djokovic at the Canadian Open. Arriving in Melbourne he was ranked No.152. If he loses to David Ferrer in the round of 16 - by no means guaranteed - he will rise to somewhere around No.100.

In addition to his undeniable abilities, Raonic boasts further strings to his bow, which is of the rare multi-string variety. Firstly, being from Canada he is well positioned to capitalise on their dearth of top line tennis talent, in much the same way Ai Sugiyama and Sania Mirza have in their respective countries, though on an admittedly more modest scale. Canada is hardly a tennis backwater, thanks to its proximity to the United States and a well-produced Masters 1000 event. A successful player could very much write his own sponsorship ticket, and is virtually guaranteed a reasonable start-up fan base.

His other advantage lies in a relatively forgotten line from *Seinfeld* – 'Another game for Milos!' - that unrivalled star-factory when it comes to quotable quotes. *Seinfeld's* capacity both to reflect and reshape the *zeitgeist* with catchy and resonant phrases was virtually unsurpassed, particularly when we remember that it aired before the internet invented 'going viral', which was then divested of meaning by going viral itself.

Every time Raonic wins, the relevant Youtube *Seinfeld* grab gets posted everywhere, which will eventually grow wearisome if he starts winning a lot. For the time being, though, there are worse fan bases to tap into than *Seinfeld*'s, so vast, and so receptive to precisely this kind of quirky juxtaposition. With baked-in support and his very own catch-phrase, watch Raonic go viral.

A Clear Way Forward

Australian Open, Third Round

(1) Nadal d. Tomic, 6/2 7/5 6/4

Bernard Tomic was not good enough to beat an out-of-sorts Rafael Nadal tonight, but there was no shame in it. It has been years since any teenager could have, the last one perhaps being Nadal himself, in a brasher, sleeveless and altogether drier incarnation. Honourable losses naturally feel worse than wins, but that was never on the cards, even at 4/0 in the second when the odds on Tomic plummeted to \$9.00, more proof that gambling is largely a tax on the stupid.

Tomic was a revelation tonight. Like Andy Murray in last year's quarterfinal, he arrived steeped in the knowledge that his regular game - which I've cheerfully derided as 'pointless noodling' - wasn't going to cut it. Consequently, he was aggressive and purposeful, almost never yielding position, and so very calm. There were only a few forehand slices, although that was still a few too many. Those notwithstanding, it seems Tomic's blithe declaration that Nadal wouldn't like his game was reasonably astute. Unlike Murray, however, he couldn't sustain it when the time came to put the Spaniard away in the second set. That was largely down to inexperience. Certainly it had little to do with Nadal, who by his own admission was already looking ahead to the third, and seemed to be locked in a futile battle against his t-shirt, which Nike has apparently fashioned from wet nylon.

Probably the most impressive aspect of Tomic's performance was his court positioning. The expectation was that Nadal would camp in the middle of the baseline, and that the youngster would be sent scurrying. Few rallies panned out that way. Nadal's groundstrokes lacked their usual penetration, it's undeniable, but it was

Tomic dictating many of the points, and Nadal was the one on the hop. The world No.1 remarked upon it in his on-court interview afterwards: he simply couldn't move Tomic from the baseline. Graphics demonstrating the rally-points for each player bore this out.

Amidst the crass media-storm surrounding Tomic's scheduling at last year's Australian Open, the reasonable fear was raised that, having sampled the big-time, he might find it a chore to slum it on the Futures and Challenger circuits. In all the fancy theories as to why he has played so little tennis in the last 12 months, this one sounds as likely as any. His straight sets loss to Nadal was in every way a more accomplished and larger effort than his five set tussle with Marin Cilic last year, which was really just a testament to the young Croatian being bamboozled. Once again, the test for Tomic will be on the lower tours, in proving himself in the weekly grind against a kaleidoscope of players, some with styles as weird as his. Once there, the trick will be to build upon the aggression he displayed tonight, since it demonstrated a clear way forward, a direct route that leads to winning tennis matches. The other task will be to subsume an overweening sense of entitlement, and to treat every moment and opponent with due respect. If Tomic learns one lesson from sharing a space with Nadal, it should be that one.

Thrashing Roddick as Aesthetic Experience

Australian Open, Fourth Round

Wawrinka d. Roddick, 6/3 6/4 6/4

Aficionados of tennis demolition hold the 2007 Australian Open semifinal between Roger Federer and Andy Roddick in stratospheric regard. Undoubtedly, Federer has dished out more comprehensive hidings - the 2004 US Open final leaps to mind - but there was just something about this one that really cements its place among the Great Shellackings. Perhaps it was Roddick's win over Federer in the meaningless Kooyong event a few weeks earlier, and the cloying commentary that the 'gap had closed'. The match itself started auspiciously, and until 4/4 in the first set there was no way to anticipate what was about to happen. What did happen is now part of the

folklore, and startled even Federer, who admitted afterwards: 'I had one of these days when everything worked. I was unbeatable. I was playing out of my mind. I am shocked myself . . . I've played good matches here, but never really almost destroyed somebody.' The most telling stat? Federer hit as many winners (45) as Roddick won points. For a certain variety of tennis fan, this was as good as it gets.

This type of fan was probably hoping somewhere in their hearts that Roddick would find a way to overcome Stanislas Wawrinka tonight. I am not unsympathetic to this point of view, notwithstanding the fact that if I was compelled to compile a list I would name Wawrinka among my favourite players. The reason, mainly, is that I'm going to be at Rod Laver Arena on Tuesday. I've watched Federer live any number of times, but, sadly, I've never witnessed him dish out a comprehensive beat-down. It's something I'm hoping to see before I die. Given the thoroughness of Wawrinka's effort tonight, it's not a treat I'm likely to be enjoying soon. Federer will need to lift just to win.

Andy Roddick is now held in such low regard by some that praising him can feel like wilful perversity. I like the guy, but I can see their point. His matches are frankly boring, mostly for the way that any point extending beyond that first decisive strike tends to unfurl gradually outward without almost any appreciable tautness. Just tuning in to watch feels like a duty; his Grand Slam campaigns feel like *tours* of duty. As a defender, he lacks the tenacity of Hewitt, the audacity of Nadal, or the virtuosity of Murray. He is merely desperate and ornery. Beyond that, however, even beyond the increasingly frequent and self-defeating tantrums, he is just so *frustrating*. There was a time when his game was synonymous with excitement. Think back to the 2003 US Open final, when he blew Juan Carlos Ferrero off the court. Now the only thing exciting about his game is when someone dismantles it as expertly as Wawrinka did. If the point was to see a Swiss dude break Roddick's heart, I suppose that would be enough, but that isn't the point at all.

The point is that with Andy Roddick up the other end, watching Roger Federer can become an aesthetic experience seen nowhere else in tennis. Maybe next time.

Officially On Notice

Australian Open, Fourth Round

Full steam ahead into Day 8 of the Australian Open, where a titanic whirlpool of predictability threatened to suck us down. A still-recovering Rafael Nadal would be pushed by Marin Cilic, as would Andy Murray by the dangerous Jurgen Melzer. How each of them navigated these reefs would have a strong bearing on how they fared further into the tournament, especially as Murray would next be facing the very dangerous Robin Soderling, a shoe-in over an overwhelmed Alexandr Dolgoplov. The only result that was in serious doubt was David Ferrer's, who might well be troubled by the young Canadian Milos Raonic.

It didn't work out that way.

Dolgoplov d. Soderling, 1/6 6/3 6/1 4/6 6/2

I still don't know why some people back Soderling to win majors. The best explanation I can dredge up is that they fancy themselves as cool-hunters, and are determined to be in on the next big craze from the outset. Last year it was ironic yo-yos and whatever came after Twitter, this year it's taciturn Swedes. Lock it in. Sadly, Soderling put in his usual quarterfinal effort, one round early, for some a premature capitulation, meaning he left too soon. For his part, Dolgoplov was a revelation, quite literally for some. For those late to the party, he's a crafty young Ukrainian. Channel 7, unhinged by the dearth of top-line local tennis talent, has made a great deal of the role his Australian coach has played in his development. Against his will, he is now Aussie Alexandr, which rolls off the tongue like the drool of someone lobotomised by the Channel 7 coverage.

Murray d. Melzer, 6/3 6/1 6/1

Dolgoplov will play Murray in the quarterfinal, who overcame Melzer in a match that was clinical, meaning it was as about as fun as any other visit to a clinic. Murray was peerless and the Austrian was hopeless. The only interesting moment came afterwards, when Jim Courier was put in his place by a dyspeptic Billy Connolly, who'd apparently come to the tennis to watch tennis, and not be engaged in a

pointless media stunt. Ambushed with a microphone, and invited to put some questions to Murray, all we received was an ominous, rumbling burr: 'Leave me alone!' Wisely, Courier left him alone.

Nadal d. Cilic, 6/2 6/4 6/3

Fans have marvelled at Cilic's resurgence. He has so far looked almost like that guy from last year's Australian Open, the one who battled through to the semifinals. Tonight he looked more like the guy who barely won consecutive matches for about seven months. Nadal looked like Nadal, and played like him, too, which is a pronounced improvement over his performance the round before. This was the world No.1, and he was terrifyingly good.

The rest of the field is officially on notice.

Triumph and Disaster

Australian Open, Quarterfinals

Ferrer d. Nadal, 6/4 6/2 6/3

Of the four men's quarterfinals being contested at this year's Australian Open, there was only one whose result was almost utterly beyond doubt. Rafael Nadal's record against nearly everyone has been impeccable of late, and he was playing *someone* tonight, suggesting he would have the edge. The fact that he was playing another Spaniard - his record demonstrates the scant fear he feels towards those presumptuous enough to be born in the same country - seemingly put it beyond doubt. True, the countryman was David Ferrer, the only Spaniard ever to defeat him in Grand Slam play, but that was years ago, in another place.

Still, when you're going up against a guy who's won 25 Grand Slam matches in a row, you'll take everything you can get. But would Ferrer have taken any solace in this random stat: it is a year to the day since Nadal's knee imploded whilst copping a ferocious barrage from Andy Murray in the 2010 Australian Open. Friendship and

decency would dictate not, quite aside from the sheer unlikelihood of something like that happening again, today. Except it did.

You doubtless know how it went down, how two games into the match (following a good 20 minutes of grind) Nadal strained his left hamstring, and departed the court for extended treatment at the next change of ends. He returned, having resolved to play on if he could - he later confided that he'd 'hated' that moment of default last year - but his look was grim, and his serve speed well down. Hamstrung, he toiled until the end. Ferrer was unrelenting, and it is not unreasonable to suggest he might well have troubled Nadal had the latter been fully fit. We'll never know, and the story of the night was not Ferrer, which is a shame for a nice guy moving into his second major semifinal. But it is what it is, and Nadal was chasing history.

History escaped, again. The mystique of the Grand Slam is considerable, and it will only gain lustre after tonight. Nadal is fond of telling anyone willing to listen how 'impossible' nearly every task on a tennis court is, whether it is beating a geriatric qualifier, or winning four majors in a row. Turns out, this time, he was right, though I suspect even he was late in believing it. As the reality sank in, his face said it all, which means the supplementary commentary supplied by my television was completely superfluous. In case it *wasn't* clear, the close-ups of the world No.1 wiping away angry tears during a changeover late in the match made it crystalline. We were talked through that, too. Nadal's face - stricken and furious - proved a valuable corrective to the sometimes overwhelming sense that he is an inhuman and unstoppable robotic killing machine, recovering again and again from seemingly mortal blows, returning to the fray to visit bloody retribution on Roger Federer. A few tears did Andy Murray's image no harm, and surely no one is exulting in this outcome. *Schadenfreude* has its limits, except on the internet.

In his press conference afterwards Nadal was philosophical, pointing out to the hushed room that every tennis career has high and low points, and that of late the highs have been abundant. Had he been poetic, he might have recalled these lines, which he should by now know by heart: 'If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same . . .'

The More Things Change

Australian Open, Quarterfinals

Rashly, I started this article prior to the last men's quarterfinal, in which a hamstrung Rafael Nadal was overwhelmed in straight sets by a sporadically inspired and always-solid David Ferrer. Of the four quarterfinals, that was the one whose outcome seemed in the least doubt, so I felt safe in my title. The underlying conceit was that the Big Four would be once again filling out the pointiest end of the draw, which occurs more often than it rightly should, but not as often as you might think. The last time it happened in a major was the first time, at the 2008 US Open, at the very moment Andy Murray joined the club. What *does* often happen is that three of them make it to the semifinals, while one somehow falls by the wayside. So it has proved again. But what's done is done; Nadal is gone and with him the 'Rafa Slam'. Lest you require an epoch-shattering angle in order to remain engaged, I'll remind you that Roger Federer is attempting to break the all-time Grand Slam record, an achievement which is not rendered less amazing by the fact that he's a chance to do it every time he turns up. British fans can probably find something to inspire them.

Federer d. Wawrinka, 6/1 6/3 6/3

Lingering disappointment that Federer would not be facing (and disgracing) Andy Roddick at this stage was only slightly allayed by the Swiss master's finely-judged performance against his junior countryman: Federer was often brilliant, but Wawrinka was rarely more than adequate, and regularly less. Nonetheless, as Wawrinka remarked afterwards, the degree to which his troubles owed to the subtle machinations of the master at the other end may not have been apparent from afar, but were decisive as far as he was concerned. Simply, Federer did not allow the Swiss No.2 to play how he likes to, whereas Wawrinka's previous opponents had. After the first set blew out, Federer went to town, and seeing him descend (or ascend) into exhibition mode can hardly have been encouraging for his opponent. My feeling is that, thus far in the tournament, Federer has been seeking to progress with the minimum of effort, but that it took until now to get the balance right. What this portends for the next match is anyone's guess.

Djokovic d. Berdych, 6/1 7/6 6/1

Perhaps it's a failing on my part, but there are times when one struggles to find much to say about a tennis match. This was one of those matches. Djokovic was virtually impregnable. He thumped his chest a lot, so I suspect he was pretty into it. There were several dozen topless men with the letters B-E-R-D-Y-C-H scrawled across their torsos, and they seemed pretty into it. Everyone else at Rod Laver Arena (myself included) dearly wanted to be into it, too, but it just felt like a mismatch, even when Berdych broke early in the second set. Djokovic looked sleek, and everywhere. I recall saying much the same thing heading into the semifinal of the Shanghai Masters last year, where Federer cleaned him up. A best-of-five match is a different matter, it's true, but it isn't that different. Djokovic is good enough to push Federer to the limit, unless the latter is feeling particularly inspired, in which case he can go to that place beyond the Serbian's reach, the place Andre Agassi once confessed he didn't recognise.

Murray d. Dolgoplov, 7/5 6/3 6/7 6/3

It's rare to see Andy Murray outfoxed, but he was by Alexandr Dolgoplov this afternoon, outfoxed and unimpressed about it. Dolgoplov, in the depressing manner of these things, is already being compared to Marcello Rios, though that's unfair insofar as he isn't a prick. Still, he's wily, unorthodox and difficult to read. Murray clearly found the experience to be a colossal pain in the backside. He was good natured about it afterwards, but still had trouble describing precisely what made the Ukrainian so slippery: 'He's just . . . different.'

Murray's fans are rightly thrilled that he has successfully navigated the 'quarter of death'. It certainly didn't hurt that both Soderling and Nadal were cleared from his path. Nonetheless, Ferrer in the semifinals could well provide a stern challenge. They met in the Tour Finals last November, and Murray had his measure. But then everyone did that week. This is a new Ferrer this year, and no one has beaten him yet.

Blinking First

Australian Open, Semifinal

Djokovic d. Federer, 7/6 7/5 6/4

Ever since the 2007 US Open final, when Novak Djokovic augmented the biomass at the elite end of men's tennis by roughly half, he and Roger Federer have constructed a rivalry seemingly built on very tight sets. It is remarkable how often their important matches feature the numbers 7/6 and 7/5. The score in that US Open final, incidentally, was 7/6 7/6 6/4 in Federer's favour, but it was only in the final set that he was the clearly superior player. This is the other striking aspect of their rivalry. Their close sets often see Federer struggling to hold on, only for Djokovic to blink first when it comes to the crunchy bit at the end.

Their epic US Open semifinal last year looked like following this pattern, until it devolved into a strange affair defined by Federer's mental walk-about in sets two and four. Then Djokovic took the fifth set 7/5, weathering match points. For once, he didn't blink, inspiring widespread theorising that their rivalry had experienced a fundamental reordering. Federer punished our presumption with three convincing wins to close out the year, including a commanding effort in the semifinals of the World Tour Finals.

Tonight's match re-energises the debate. It was close - 119 points to 111 - but Djokovic was unflappable. When he wasn't shanking backhands, Federer was perpetually off-balance. Federer is amongst the sport's most economical and elegant movers, but Djokovic, like Andy Murray, has a way of disrupting his footwork, of making him look a trifle awkward. It is as though their capacity to change direction and to embrace the lines off both sides stops Federer from hedging his bets. With no obvious shot to cover, he seems always to guess wrong. As a result, Djokovic could tonight maintain control of a rally while playing within himself, as Federer struggled to set his feet. Aside from that curious period in the second set, when momentum lurched around drunkenly, the Serb controlled the match exquisitely.

The slowness of the surface and balls - a lethal combination that has inspired the epithet 'blue clay' - meant that being able to control the game whilst playing within

yourself was a pretty useful advantage to have. Federer could only wrest control back by hitting out, which too often resulted in him hitting it out. There have been plenty of times in the last decade when it hasn't gone out - and bear in mind that the head-to-head between these two is 13-7 in Federer's favour - but today the magic just wasn't there. That rarefied place the Swiss periodically ascends to remained tantalisingly beyond reach. Mired here on Earth, Federer is only an exceptionally fine tennis player, which it turns out isn't enough to overcome Djokovic in this kind of form.

Djokovic moves through to his second Australian Open final, exactly three years to the day after he won his first one.

A Tennis Player

Australian Open, Semifinal

Murray d. Ferrer, 4/6 7/6 6/1 7/6

The crowd in Rod Laver Arena was particularly rowdy this evening, a fact I quickly surmised from the noise they were generating, which was considerable. Lest I misinterpreted it, a valuable second opinion arrived in the form of the Channel 7 commentary: 'The crowd is loud tonight.' They attempted to cross to Todd Woodbridge for confirmation, but he couldn't hear them very well, what with the crowd being so loud. Woodbridge was stationed at the back of the press pit, which means he was positioned slightly further from the action than the main commentators, but very close to Brad Gilbert, over whose constant babble Woodbridge might conceivably hear the crowd, which was very loud. These competing auditory forces were sufficient to scramble his brain. Thus afflicted, he had no trouble in producing such gems as, 'Andy Murray is what I call a tennis player'. 364 more of those, and he'll have a desk calendar.

It is a flourishing statement, one that looks round for applause. It's also a cliché, and a tacit insult to Murray's opponent, David Ferrer, the implication being that he isn't a tennis player. The point, as I'm sure we are all aware and as Woodbridge went on to explain at length, is that Murray plays with considerable variety, and thinks more

than most other guys on court, constructing points and adapting his play to prevailing conditions and his opponent's game. This is standard stuff, and the commentators are contractually obliged to bring it up whenever Murray plays, much like mentioning a sponsor every seventeen seconds. After some time, while we slowly assimilated Woodbridge's radical philosophy, he spelled out the corollary, which is that Ferrer is merely a 'ball-striker'. Being a tennis player clearly trumps being a mere ball striker, and so we all sighed with relief when Murray turned the match around with a tactical adjustment, throwing off his opponent's metronomic game with a some charming and varied play, including a series of bold moves into the forecourt.

Interviewed by Jim Courier afterwards, Murray was invited to elaborate on his strategic shift in the third set. Apparently the Scot hadn't read the script, and could come up with nothing more sophisticated than some guff about going for looser strings, being a bit more aggressive, and how Ferrer's level had dropped. Then, in the fourth, Ferrer started playing better and it got tight again. It is a conceit of sports commentary that the inner game is more prominent than is actually the case. Military metaphors are *de rigueur* in this area, so I'll throw another one in by pointing out that strategy goes out the window once the first shot is fired. When probed, most players tend to feel that the guy who played better won, simple as that.

Woodbridge's position in the stands was previously occupied by Roger Rasheed, whom one suspects was vaguely put out by having to insert the odd normal word into an otherwise steady stream of neologisms and corporate-speak. His entire approach to tennis is predicated on a faith in strategic management, which makes him a bizarre foil for Gael Monfils. (Perhaps the Frenchman's continuing befuddlement is not unrelated to the fact that so much of Rasheed's advice has to be translated into English before it can be translated into French. Chinese whispers ensue.) What would Rasheed have made of the moment when Courier asked Murray what he was thinking, down set point in the second set? Murray confessed that he'd been so focussed on playing tennis - he is a 'tennis player', you'll recall - that he forgot the score, believing it to be 3/4. Look for Rasheed to incorporate hypnotism and targeted head trauma into his 'integrated coaching solution moving forward'.

Anyway, Murray is through to his second straight Australian Open final, where he will play Novak Djokovic for the first time in a major: two 'tennis players' on the cusp of

greatness, hitherto restricted to near perfect parallel by the all-time greats above them, a fascinating rivalry played out in the rankings but not on the court. Until now.

A Second Stamp

Australian Open, Final

Djokovic d. Murray, 6/4 6/2 6/3

Channel 7 didn't exactly redeem itself at the eleventh hour - we're way beyond that - but it could have been worse. Of course there was the usual ear-jarring nonsense - 'Djokovic is asking a lot of question marks out there' - but at least Bruce McAvaney got to serve up a line he's clearly had on the stove for a while: 'The Djoker becomes a king!' There was even a touch of feathery irony that I'm going to assume was deliberate. As the players made their way onto court, the master of ceremonies Craig Willis - whose liquid tonsils and dry delivery have helped make AO Radio such a pleasure - announced: 'Representing Great Britain, Andy Murray!' The coverage director allowed themselves a momentary caprice, and immediately cut to a placard proclaiming 'Great Scot'. A telling disjunction between words and images, the gap where meaning lurks. The important point here is that no Scottish man has ever won a major. I might be wrong, but I think that's what all the hoopla is about. Frankly, it has been generous of the English to get so excited on Scotland's behalf. Now that Andy Murray has lost his third major final, I'm sure they will be generously leading the charge to trample him.

I don't really subscribe to a structuralist approach to sport, and am slow to succumb to it when invited to. In general, there is too little acknowledgement of such factors as coincidence and just having a bad day. That said, after three Grand Slam finals in which Murray has failed to take a set, and in which he has gone relatively meekly into that goodnight, I have to wonder if there isn't something fundamentally flawed in his approach. This is a guy who owns the Masters Series format - he has six of them - last year defeating Roger Federer in two finals, the second one a comprehensive hiding. He's *good* enough to win majors, especially when there isn't an inspired Swiss guy up the other end. But this latest effort, whereby he fell to a superb Novak

Djokovic but wouldn't have troubled an ordinary Tomas Berdych, shakes one's faith that Grand Slam success is inevitable. Time will tell, eventually. More immediately, the issue will be how Murray recovers. Last year's loss inspired a five month slump. This year's loss was worse, through recycling the sins of the past. Hopefully the Scot has grown more resilient.

Anyway, enough of Murray. Novak Djokovic won, and was superb. Regarding his game, there isn't much to say that wasn't said by everyone following his victory over Federer, and that hasn't been said for years. The only thing that really came home to me tonight was how perfectly Djokovic strikes the balance between offence and defence. He is almost never in the wrong mode, unlike his opponent, who was often in neither mode. That balance is a very hard one to achieve. Successful defending - and tonight Djokovic was truly outstanding - frequently inspires a player to grow passive, and to invite attack. Relentless offence can make it difficult to pay proper respect to an opponent's shots. Doing both at the level at which Djokovic did so is a very rare accomplishment, and not one confined to this final. It's been a feature for the entire tournament, and the reason he has looked so unbeatable.

To a large degree, Djokovic has *been* unbeatable, dropping only eight matches since Wimbledon, and all but two of those to either Federer or Rafael Nadal. That's a solid base, and when you throw in a Davis Cup and an impeccable Australian Open title, you can expect he might start losing to those guys a lot less. I notice Djokovic had a little 'Nole' embroidered on the tail of his Sergio Tacchino polo. Perhaps I'm over-reading it, but it suggests he feels like he belongs in the company of the Big Two, who are not hostile to monogramming. Their other vanity is stamping their bags with their major title tallies, like Spitfire pilots advertising confirmed kills on the fuselage. Djokovic would have looked frankly stupid with just one stamp, but he'll look a great deal less so with two. Based on tonight, who is willing to wager he won't have a third stamp before the year is out?

Valuable Lessons

With the year's first major concluded, the annual diaspora has commenced, with the haves retiring to their palaces, and the hoi-polloi spreading to South America, South Africa, and West Croatia. As an Australian, this signals the end of tennis being played at a reasonable hour, until the Asian swing in late September. As ever, the general *Sehnsucht* is profound, pretentious even. So many questions, mostly unanswered. What did it signify? What did we learn?

1. We learned that Roger Federer is done for. Actually, did we? The great man looked reasonable en route to the semifinal, whereupon he was out-manoeuvred and out-hit by a rampant Novak Djokovic. Federer played decently, but he was hardly in the mode commonly and lovingly dubbed 'full flight'. Still, he has accrued Grand Slam titles playing no better - the 2006 Australian Open leaps to mind - but at no point in those tournaments did he encounter anything as fearsome as Djokovic in this form. Coming to Melbourne, Federer was clearly the man to beat, and his fans shouldn't be too dismayed that someone did. The man himself didn't look especially beaten afterwards; he knew he'd played a reasonable match, but that Djokovic was a class above. As the first set grew furious, Janko Tipsarevic was heard on Twitter: 'Federer vs Djokovic tennis level is just insane....' I was immediately put in mind of that scene in *The Matrix* when the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar gathers round breathlessly to watch Neo and Morpheus spar. If Federer can elicit this kind of response from a fellow pro when not playing his best, I would hazard that he has some game left in him yet.

2. We learned that Juan Martin del Potro's comeback is going to take some time. Anyone with a brain not composed of lime jelly already knew that, but now those suffering cerebral damage know it, too. There had undoubtedly been a cherished hope among his fan-base that the giant Argentine would miraculously storm his way to the title. But when he followed up a tough win over Feliciano Lopez with a meek loss to Florian Mayer in Sydney, then contrived the same combination with Dudi Sela and Marcos Baghdatis in Melbourne, the message was clear. The message had been clear for some time, since he'd already told us: the return will take months, not weeks. Even this is sounding optimistic.

3. We learned that Channel 7's tennis coverage still languishes somewhere shy of perfection, even with John Alexander otherwise occupied (an answered prayer, that one). That said, Eurosport was worse, since it featured the endlessly painful Mats Wilander, and the painfully ebullient Barbara Schett. Understandably, English is not Schett's first language, but this can often work in one's favour. Played right, it can lend one a certain exotic allure. Schett, who routinely conducted some of the worst post-match interviews ever witnessed by humankind, just sounded like a half-wit. ESPN was, as ever, best avoided, since you knew what to expect: a celebration of commercial patriotism that was only outdone by the locals through home-court advantage. In terms of coverage, the stand-out was once again AO Radio, streamed through the Australian Open website. It was ideal when synchronised with the images on television, although this rarely worked because Channel 7 kept delaying the broadcast in order to reliably miss the first point of each game, and the first game of each set.

4. We learned that the first reward awaiting young players breaking through is being saddled with a tired comparison to a former (or even current) great. Thus Milos Raonic is the new Pete Sampras. Alexandr Dolgopolov is the second coming of Marcello Rios, and Bernard Tomic is the fifth coming of Miloslav Mecir, an egregious comparison given that the 'Big Cat' was so nicknamed for his nimbleness. Grigor Dimitrov, who is currently suffering under a near-meaningless two-week suspension for striking an official last year, is the latest 'Baby Federer'. (Richard Gasquet, the first 'Baby Federer', has his sights set on becoming the next James Blake.) Really, what we've learned is that too many fans and journalists are united by their inability to come up with an original way to describe new players. Furthermore, their paucity of expression results in pointless pressure. When you suggest someone plays like Pete Sampras, you aren't just saying their style is vaguely reminiscent. You're forming an association, creating an expectation, and ensuring that the poor kid will have to field absurd questions about it sooner rather than never. Mark my words.

Perhaps we've only learned that most sports journalism is complacent and self-serving, but we already knew that.

The Golden Swing and the US Spring (February – April)

Organic Gruel

SA Tennis Open, South Africa

Greul d. Raonic, 7/6 6/4

The supercharged Milos Raonic bandwagon roars on. His excellent Melbourne adventure saw him advance some 58 places up the rankings, departing Australia at No.94. This momentum carried him into the SA Tennis Open in Johannesburg, where he once again burst through qualifying, and then upended the No.2 seed Yen-Hsun Lu in the first round. The bandwagon is picking up a lot of new passengers - friends accrue when the weather is fair - and amongst them there was even spirited talk of the Canadian taking the event. After all, this is the kind of shindig made for breakthrough titlists. The top seed is Feliciano Lopez, which says it all.

Regrettably, predictions of a maiden ATP title came to naught. It is frequently the way for youngsters on the make, when a scintillating upset win is immediately undone by a poor follow-up effort to a lesser opponent. Having disposed of Lu, Raonic much have fancied his chances against the no-nonsense veteran Simon Greul. Did I say 'no-nonsense'? Actually, Greul seemed determined to blow it, double-faulting away a couple of match points before stumbling home, sheepishly. Nonsense sums it up perfectly.²

Raonic should not be too downcast, and nor should his myriad new friends (those that didn't decamp at the first hint of clouds). This kind of thing happens to all the greats on their way up. Back in 1990, Pete Sampras followed up his first US Open title by folding to the arch-Gallic and 134th-ranked Guillaume Raoux. Sorry: Sampras was precisely the reference I swore to avoid.

²A surpassingly strange and unrelated aside: did you know that googling 'Raonic Greul' yields a great deal of information about 'organic gruel', almost none of which is interesting?

PBZ Zagreb Indoors, Croatia

Brands d. Karlovic, 7/5 6/7 7/6

But for that single break at the death of the first set, this is the scoreline that will be chiselled into Ivo Karlovic's tombstone. It tells you almost everything you need to know, about his tennis in any case. Watching this match slowly congeal - predictably, tediously, with the returner numbly trudging across the baseline - I was reminded that Karlovic doesn't play matches, he inflicts them; on opponents, on the crowd, on the sport. He seems like a gentle, sensitive kind of guy, somewhat doleful. I wonder, in all earnestness, at the dimensions of his fan base outside of Croatia? It is not a generous question, granted.

[This was not just an ungenerous question, but a misguided one. It turns out that 'Dr. Ivo's passively soulful on-court demeanour hides a darkly cynical and amusing character. He has a devoted global following on Twitter, a medium that professional tennis players are sadly obliged to embrace. Karlovic is the one of the few who uses it well.]

So Far From Anywhere

The most rewarding thing about the disparate little events huddled in the shadows of the Grand Slams is how, lacking the cachet to pull big names, they tend to attract sizable contingents of locals, provided there is a contingent available. This can prove interesting for any number of reasons, mostly due to prevailing conditions, culture and the attractiveness of those involved. Half the field in Zagreb are mercurial Slavs, by turns zany and lugubrious. Meanwhile, at the Movistar Open half the players appropriately look like movie-stars. Think Tomas Bellucci, Rui Machado and Potito Starace.³ Don't think David Nalbandian or Juan Ignacio Chela.

What about Johannesburg? Well, to echo Porfirio Diaz' famous lament for Mexico: 'Poor SA Tennis Open! So close to the Australian Open, so far from anywhere.'⁴ It's

³In the vein of my 'organic gruel' Google experience from the other day, I tried searching for 'Potito Starace' but sadly all the results featured the Italian tennis player, and nothing about potato starch, proving that you can't pre-empt these things.

⁴'Poor Mexico! So far from God, so close to the United States.'

just not working out, is it? Notwithstanding its relative youth, when an event is being overshadowed by Zagreb and Santiago, hardly titans of the ATP circuit, there's an issue somewhere. In order for a tournament like this one to prevail, it really needs an angle, something to offer beyond meagre ranking points, a small prize-pool and a couple of long-haul flights. Zagreb is close to home for a host of second-tier Europeans, while the South American swing allows the dirtballers to sink their teeth into some tasty clay for the first time in months.

This biggest name the SA Tennis Open has so far attracted is Jo-Wilfried Tsonga a few years ago, but even winning it was insufficient incentive to return. He looks pretty chuffed in the photos, clutching that absurd trophy, but he doubtless looks the same after a really good one-night-stand, with a similar disinclination to stick around. This year the top seed and defending champion is Feliciano Lopez, who won zero matches and might have his work cut out negotiating an appearance fee come 2012. Some have labelled the event a glorified Challenger, but that's not terribly fair on Challengers, a few of which are pretty classy. Last year the Lugarno Challenger final saw Stan Wawrinka beat Starace in three sets, which from a dollar-for-entertainment ratio delivered superior value to the Australian Open final, tickets for which cost roughly three cows and your firstborn son.

Nonetheless, if you're South African and you care, you're hopefully delighted at the efforts of Kevin Anderson, Fritz Wolmarans, Rik de Voest and Izak Van der Merwe, all but the first of whom are new to me. I'm not certain their names will ever eclipse, say, Jacques Kallis in their home country, even after this week, but they're making the most of their opportunities. The issue is that the opportunities have arisen due to the big names not being very big and going out early. What the event is crying out for is some bigger names, turning up and doing well. If that were to happen, and a local was to go deep, then that would be something to stay home about.

An Ever Expanding Category

Babolat and Roland Garros, the 'Ultimate Tennis Experience'.

As exercises in synergy go, a partnership between a tennis tournament and a manufacturer of tennis equipment is not a bad fit, especially if they're both 'driven by a unifying, common value: passion for tennis'. Nevertheless, to the ever-expanding category named Stuff That Only Makes Sense When Viewed Cynically, we can now add the decision by the French Tennis Federation to replace the venerably worthy Dunlop balls at the French Open with Babolats. If nothing else, it ensures that the inevitable winner - Rafael Nadal - won't have to soil his strings with a rival company's equipment. Indeed, if Nike persists in kitting him out in oiled vinyl, we may see him sporting Babolat duds, too - a clean sweep.

The old Dunlop ball was by all accounts heavier than the 'new' Babolat. It is also used in every substantial clay event preceding the French Open. Players take this kind of differential pretty seriously - some claim ball dynamics are as essential as surface variation - and they will now be arriving in Paris to strikingly different conditions. This is something they have complained about before, and was the primary reason why so much money and effort was devoted to switching the Rome and Madrid Masters events. Madrid was considered an inadequate warm-up, since its altitude means it plays much faster. Unlike Paris, which on a cool damp day plays like treacle, shots in Madrid tend to fly on the players, which is an interesting effect, one that can be partially simulated by using lighter balls. Like Babolats.

As I say, the decision makes ample sense if viewed cynically. Money talks, a fact that was sufficiently clear already, but is rendered in searing clarity when viewed within the context of Babolat's rather shyly titled 'Ultimate Tennis Experience', which sounds like bad news for those of us hoping to experience tennis again at a later date. In practical terms, it means that, in addition to the balls, Babolat will be providing stringing services and a range of Roland Garros badged clothing. Advertising featuring Nadal will be even more prominent than before, if only that were possible.

The full press release - apparently translated from French by a not very bright robot - showcases the usual eagerness to cram as many broadly synonymous terms into as

short a space as possible. Thus we discover that Babolat will deliver 'know-how and expertise', presumably gained through its passionate commitment to 'inventing, innovating and designing'. Brilliant.

Luck of the Draw: Rotterdam 2011

Novak Djokovic has pulled out of next week's ABN AMRO World Tennis Tournament in Rotterdam. The cited reason is a shoulder strain, although given the absence of both Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer, is it unreasonable to suggest that his withdrawal signals a broader strategic alignment, one akin to embroidering your nickname on your clothes, and winning the odd Slam? Is Djokovic now too good for events like these? To answer my own question: yes, it is an unreasonable suggestion. Facetious, even, but I couldn't help myself.

For any other ATP event in fallow February - with the possible exception of Dubai - Djokovic's withdrawal would be crippling. But Rotterdam almost invariably attracts a very solid roster, and this year's is excellent, just about worthy of a Masters 1000. Furthermore, without the expansive seeding of a major to bog down the early rounds, there are marquee match-ups from the get-go.

Robin Soderling is the defending champion, and the top seed thanks to Djokovic's withdrawal. Until Bercy rolls round, this will be the most prestigious title he has ever had to defend. First up he faces Robin Haase. Balls will be struck, tremendously. For his sins - which are now considerable - Andy Murray has drawn Marcos Baghdatis in the opening round. Had the burly Cypriot played *this* week, he would have been top seed at any event he deigned to grace. Not in Rotterdam. It will be a stern test of Murray's assertion that he won't be reprising last year's prolonged slump, although eight days is still a taxing turn-around from Melbourne.

Cult fanbases will collide when Nikolay Davydenko takes on Michael Llodra, while Ernests Gulbis and Thiemo de Bakker will wage separate wars against their own wills, meanwhile battling each other for control of the self-destruct button. Any hope that Jo-Wilfried Tsonga or Marin Cilic could rest slightly easier, having drawn qualifiers, was rapidly quashed by a glance at the qualifying event, which is already

underway. The 16-man qualifying draw is a further testament to the strength of the Rotterdam field. Philipp Petzschner, raffishly bearded of late, is the top seed. Other notables include Dimitry Tursonov still ambling up the comeback trail, Julien Benneteau, and Grigor Dimitrov. These guys are not early round gimmes at the best of times, and now they'll be hardened from a couple of tune-up matches. Any of them could wreck Cilic's week in no time flat. I don't much care for making bold predictions based on draws, but I'm going to lock that one in.

That Almost Never Happens

Anderson d. Devvarman, 4/6 6/3 6/2

Dodig d. Berrer, 6/3 6/4

Kevin Anderson won his maiden ATP title in his home country this week, which is something that almost never happens. Indeed, in the entire history of this week, it has only happened twice, the other time being Ivan Dodig in Zagreb. You could say they were unprepared for the achievement, but both have clearly leafed through the relevant chapter in the *ATP Media Relations Handbook (7th Edition)*: 'This is the best thing that can happen to a player - to play at home in front of your own crowd and win your first title. I'm really happy and enjoying the moment. It's been amazing all week; it's an unbelievable experience. I didn't have any pressure, I just tried to concentrate on my tennis and play point by point until the last point.' Blandness of this calibre cuts through cultural differences, to the extent that I challenge anyone to guess which player actually said it. If you need a clue, it wasn't the one promising to donate part of his winnings to the Save The Rhino campaign.

Dodig is the third Croatian to claim the Zagreb event in as many years, the others being Marin Cilic and Marin Cilic. Anderson is the first South African to win Johannesburg, and will probably remain the last person to win it ever. The SA Tennis Open's contract is unlikely to be renewed next year, owing to its low profile, poor field, and the ATP's determination to slim down the calendar.

Robredo d. Giraldo, 6/2 2/6 7/6

Meanwhile, over in Santiago, Tommy Robredo has taken his title haul to double figures, awakening from 3/5 down in final set to deflower final-virgin Santiago Giraldo. Had Giraldo studied his *Handbook* a little closer, particularly the bit about playing 'point by point until the last point', we might have had three first time titlists this week. Really, it's what weeks like this are for.

Arguably the most interesting thing to happen in Santiago this week was Robredo's openly antagonistic semifinal against Fabio Fognini, which ended with the Spaniard repeatedly refusing to shake hands, and Fognini loudly declaring him to be a '*Pedazo de Mierda*'. It was the kind of scene usually reserved for a Daniel Koellerer match, and the best part is that they're drawn to meet in the first round of the Costa do Sauipe tournament next week.

Risking Censure

ABN AMRO World Tennis Tournament, Rotterdam

Tsonga d. Dimitrov, 6/4 6/4

Did you know that Grigor Dimitrov has modelled his groundstrokes on Roger Federer's? Yes? I mention this purely for legal reasons since, judging by the commentary for every one of his matches, the censure attracted by not doing so is severe. No one can quite say what will happen if this fascinating fact goes unmentioned, since that has never happened. We *are* told that such close emulation of another player's game can be 'dangerous', which I suspect is a definition of 'dangerous' somewhat removed from, say, the CIA's, or Michael Jackson's. I can't really see the harm in it, and don't subscribe to the view that it somehow curtails Dimitrov's essential tennis personality, whatever that is. His technique is excellent, clearly, and he's young. More troubling is that in addition to Federer's strokes, Dimitrov seems determined to doggedly trace his idol's career arc. We're now at the point where initial promise is constantly frustrated, and he is overtaken by whomever the current iteration of Lleyton Hewitt is. Some lean years ahead, but he's very soon to meet his future wife.

SAP Open, San Jose

Berankis d. Becker, 6/3 7/6

Raonic d. Malisse, 6/3 6/4

Realistically, Dimitrov would probably be better served by playing San Jose, where the field is considerably weaker, and a hungry Bulgarian in search of confidence and steak could notch some meaningful results. This was clearly the reasoning for his fellow-upstarts Ricardas Berankis and Milos Raonic, both of whom today posted very solid wins over much older and more experienced opponents. Last night Raonic also had a steak, according to the crushingly dull blog he's maintaining in San Jose. Perhaps he's more like Sampras than we realised. Speaking of which . . .

Monfils d. Sampras, 7/6 6/4

The stream of last night's exhibition match between Pete Sampras and Gael Monfils in San Jose was broadcast in high definition and commentated without distinction. It was all too much for my internet connection and my brain, respectively, especially when the stream would stutter to a stop whenever someone did something outstanding. This invariably involved Monfils running very fast or Sampras rushing the net. I know this because the commentator - from the 'woah-dude' school of sports calling - would be saying things like 'Woah! Serve and volleying! That's some serve-volleying right there. Good old serve-volleying. Old-school California serve-volley!' These were not separate comments, by the way, just the one.

It was the old-school Roman philosopher Seneca who first argued that frustrated expectations lie at the root of all rage. He lived before internet streaming, yet he somehow foresaw my urge to hurl my monitor into the wall. Matching his stoicism (which was legendary), I refrained, and saved myself the cost of a decent LCD panel. But I'm being churlish. A couple of years ago I couldn't have watched tennis from San Jose at all. Last year I couldn't watch it as a high definition slideshow. Who knows what the future might bring? Perhaps in a few years I'll be able to reach through my screen and throttle the commentator personally.

As for the match, it was the usual exhibition fare, which Monfils failed to enliven much with some usual exhibition antics, such as grabbing a camera from a

photographer, or pocketing a ball that Sampras had ostentatiously mopped his brow with. It wasn't hilarious, at least not in the league of Nicolas Mahut in drag. Still, Monfils appeared genuinely honoured to be there, and said as much several times in the interview afterwards. Actually, that was basically all he said. For his part, Sampras admitted he was pleased he'd held his own, before allowing himself to be goaded into trash-talking Andre Agassi, against whom he is due to perform another exhibition in a few weeks. It was all in good fun, or would be if anything between those two could be.

Why Compare?

Following his defeat by Novak Djokovic in this year's Australian Open, Roger Federer was invited to compare the loss to the ostensibly similar one three years earlier. Baffled, Federer considered the request for a few seconds, then blurted 'Why compare?', before admonishing the journalist for posing such a foolish question in the first place.

Foolish or not, we can see where the journalist was coming from. Both losses came to the same guy at the same stage of the same tournament, and even boasted a similar scoreline. When that many similarities accrue, it seems wilful to ignore the clear pattern. Without patterns there is no meaning, and without meaning there is little to write about beyond a wretched summary of events. In the journalist's mind, there was probably a useful comparison to be made, one worth exploring. For Federer, however, the connection did not exist, and the act of comparing the two events was superficial, irrelevant, and meaningless. He has played Djokovic any number of times since early 2008, and must have spent innumerable hours with him off court in a range of activities. A match from three years earlier, no matter how similar, was uselessly remote, and provided no insight into his latest defeat.

There is no good reason why Federer has never won the Paris Indoors, and yet it remains the only Masters tournament at which he has never even reached the final. The conditions are suitable: fast and indoors - not radically unlike the Basel event where he savours near-annual triumph. Yet, prior to 2010, the great Swiss hadn't

progressed to the quarterfinals at Bercy since 2003. The assumption that there is just something about the event that doesn't sit well with him is an easy one to make. Federer was asked about it during the event last year. As he points out, for several years he was injured and didn't play (2004-2006), while in 2008 his back seized up, and in 2009 he had a bad day against a surging Julien Benneteau. There was also 2007, when like everyone else he fell to an inspired David Nalbandian. The closest Federer comes to a unifying reason is to suggest that the event's scheduling means he was often under extra pressure trying to qualify for the Year End Championships, although this hasn't been the case since at least 2003. The main point, however, was that there was no single good reason, but lots of little good reasons, and none of them were related to each other. His take on it: 'Next thing you know your career has not been very good here in Paris at the Indoors.' So it goes.

It is the writer's lot to tease order from the mess of life, thereby establishing narrative, and creating meaning. That's all well and good - the tendency is basically impossible to gainsay - but it is not without risk. Firstly, the temptation is strong to uncover connections where there are none. There is such a thing as coincidence, although it's something good narrative prefers to avoid. Indeed, coincidence is a device shared by reality and bad narrative, the latter because it's lazy, and the former because it's real. Federer's continued failure to win the Paris Indoors is really just a coincidence. There is no issue for him to address. It is dull copy to say so, which is presumably why fans and journalists go on searching for a grand unifying theory, but it is no less true for that. But if you search hard enough for patterns, you'll discover them everywhere. It's a gift that sports fans and journalists share with conspiracy crackpots, which perhaps explains why the language in either case is so alike.

The second issue is that in being seduced by specious connections, one can consequently grow prescriptive. Thus some pundits, aware that Robin Soderling has never performed well at the Australian Open, fell over themselves to write the Swede off even as he claimed the Brisbane title and snatched the No.4 seeding. To them, Soderling's accumulated results pointed clearly to an underlying issue - which was never articulated very clearly - one which would again impair his progress. His fourth round loss to Alexandr Dolgoplov doubtless only buttressed this belief. But Soderling is so improved a player since 2009 Roland Garros that his results before

that are almost meaningless, at least as a form guide. As well as coincidence, there is also such a thing as just having a bad day. Anyone who has played tennis knows that these can happen. Sometimes nothing works even with the best preparation in the world. Top players are better at managing it, but it's still a reality, and the margins are commensurately smaller. At this level, a day doesn't have to be very bad before it can't be worse.

Don't Watch This Space

Yet another week with three tournaments running concurrently, meaning that for the general tennis fan - whose interest begins and ends at the majors - there is a vast array of tennis to not get caught up in. Depending on how particular you are about the tennis you ignore, this week featured something for everyone.

ABN AMRO World Tennis Tournament, Rotterdam

If eschewing high quality tennis between big names is your thing, then Rotterdam was, as ever, the one to steer clear of. Judging by the deserted stands, the good burghers of Rotterdam felt the same and stayed away in droves. However, the problem with Rotterdam is that the names are big enough that the event almost intrudes into public awareness. I actually caught a highlight of Robin Soderling beating Viktor Troicki on one of those late-night sports round up shows, presumably as desperate filler when no Premier League footballer disgraced himself that day, as unlikely as that sounds.

Soderling's first victory over the mercurial Philip Kohlschreiber was the match of the week (closely followed by Tomas Berdych's pulsating win over Dmitry Tursonov, still inching along that comeback trail). As with all of their encounters it crescendoed to a final set tiebreaker. Other firsts included Soderling defending a title for the first time, Troicki moving into the top 20, and Andy Murray playing when he should have been convalescing, and then losing to Marcos Baghdatis for the third time. He's never done that before. All told, it was the finest tournament played this week, and the extent to which no one watched it will be matched only by the thoroughness with which no one remembers it, given what was going down elsewhere.

Brasil Open, Costa do Sauipe

I am unsure how much faith to place in the propaganda shots put out by the ATP, in which half of Bahia apparently descended on Costa do Sauipe, then broke into impromptu carnival at the prospect of a 250 event rocking through town. The title sponsor being Gillette, there were plenty of photo-shoots involving the players shaving. In their spare moments they played tennis. Crowd shots suggested this part was almost as well attended as the spontaneous party erupting in the street outside. If this sounds like the kind of malarkey you can do without, then you could do worse than overlook the Brasil Open.

The anticipated rematch between Tommy Robredo and Fabio Fognini came to nothing. There is bad blood there, but none of it spilled onto the court. In winning, Robredo could summon nothing more piercing than a pointed 'Vamos'. As with Rotterdam, the top seed took the event. In Brazil that honour fell to Nicolas Almagro, who is looking like the best claycourter in the world, apart from the four or five guys who are too important to play events like this one. In the final he saw off the spirited and fascinating Alexandr Dolgoplov. It was Almagro's eighth career title, and Dolgoplov's first career final. Of all the young players coming through there are only two more eagerly watched than Dolgoplov. These are Grigor Dimitrov, who went out early in Rotterdam, and Milos Raonic, who won San Jose, which rather eclipsed Dolgoplov's achievement.

SAP Open, San Jose

The organisers of the SAP Open have proved to my satisfaction that an ice hockey stadium is an excellent place to store unused bleachers. Sadly, no one turned up to appreciate their effort, which was a shame since had they done so, some of them might have noticed there was a tennis tournament going on. Of the three events being mostly ignored around the world this week, San Jose is the one that will be remembered longest, which is ironic as it featured the least memorable tennis.

San Jose will be remembered because Juan Martin del Potro's comeback progressed to the semifinal, beating Lleyton Hewitt en route, who always paradoxically feels like he's both coming back and never away. James Blake is also coming back. He'll be coming back again in Memphis next week, where we'll be

treated once more to his theory that the way to stop your shots going out is to hit them harder. It will be remembered by Fernando Verdasco for that first tiebreak in the final, when he blew four straight set points against a youngster in his first tour final, at the precisely the moment when an established top ten player should have slammed shut the door. It won't be remembered for Verdasco's refusal to shake the umpire's hand since, sadly, that seems to be happening all the time of late.

Mostly, though, it will be remembered for Milos Raonic, who claimed his first ATP title in just his eighth main draw appearance. Four weeks ago he was ranked 152nd in the world. He is now No.59, and moving fast. If, like the citizens of San Jose, you don't want to see more of this guy, don't watch this space.

Outdoor Event Area

In a move that will presumably shock no one, the ATP has opted not to renew The SA Tennis Open's contract for 2012. The stands at the evocatively titled Montecasino Outdoor Event Area will remain silent indefinitely, or at least until some other outdoor event requires an area.

The ramifications are neither especially profound nor far-reaching. Naturally those concerned are disappointed, and at least one South African columnist appears to be taking it quite personally: I don't know what format the award winning *Mail & Guardian* comes in, but the editorial style is pure tabloid. On the plus side, Kevin Anderson will have the rare distinction of holding his maiden title for ever, although to defend his points next year he'll have to venture to Europe, where the indoor courts will help, though the top-fifty opponents won't.

Who knows, it may turn out for the best. South Africa deserves a decent tournament to call its own, but Johannesburg wasn't it. It could have been scheduled a week earlier, during the Australian Open, and it would hardly have attracted less global interest, or a weaker field. It seems a long way off, but perhaps losing Johannesburg is the first step in eventually getting the event it deserves. Then again, it's possible the whole thing has been a decisive response by a governing body bent on ensuring Feliciano Lopez is never top seed anywhere ever again.

The SA Tennis Open will be replaced on the calendar by the Open Sud du France, which has been uprooted from its traditional home in October. Fans yearning for the latter event will have to hold out for a few more months. Any fears that the switch might deprive the world of a truly ridiculous trophy are quickly allayed by a glance at those awarded at Montpellier. If the winner's and finalist's platters were somehow fused, they would surely prove useful in tracking down the Ark of the Covenant. Or the Lost City of Gold. Or perhaps even another fabled Outdoor Event Area.

Real Tennis

Regions Morgan Keegan Championships, Memphis

Raonic d. Verdasco, 6/4 3/6 7/6

My resolution not to write about Milos Raonic again for a while has been rendered shaky by the fact that he keeps on winning. Efforts at slowing his progress have come to nothing, and there are only so many rock-jawed, flinty-eyed Spaniards we can fling into his path. Contrary to widespread perception, these are in finite supply. Come next year, the North American Spring tour could be seeing one less. There was surely a method in Fernando Verdasco's decision to play this little lead-up to Indian Wells - easy ranking points and a monopoly on the swooning lasses - but it's a method that now risks driving him to madness. In just three days, it's all blown up in his face, like a canister of hair spray left too near an open flame, a juxtaposition Verdasco surely knows to avoid.

Raonic's victory in San Jose was a stirring win - cringingly patriotic - but it was not without its qualifications, and consequently not without those bent on disqualifying it. Quibblers pointed to his semifinal walkover against Gael Monfils, and to that dolt who hollered out on championship point. In the dreadful metonymy of sporting parlance, San Jose raised a lot of question marks. Verdasco undoubtedly found Raonic's win about as convincing as his own defeat, which he seemed to believe should be laid at the feet of any number of people, though not his own.

But it is one of the amusing quirks of the ATP tour that players who have crossed paths only rarely (or never) can suddenly encounter one another every week.

Revenge might be closer than you know. Three days after Verdasco suffered ignominy in California, he was drawn to meet the fey and wildcarded Raonic in Memphis, which is a nominally more prestigious bash insofar as there's better prize money, and more Andy Roddick. I wonder if Verdasco finds this amusingly quirky? Now that he has lost again, I'm guessing he does, and that nothing would delight him more than discussing it at length. Clearly he is inclined towards balanced post-match retrospection: 'For me that's not a real match in tennis. I hope to play soon against him in clay court to show him what it is to play tennis, and play rallies, and run, and not only serve.'

To Raonic's visible achievements, which are already considerable, we can now add the secret miracle of breaking his opponent's serve using nothing but his own. There's doubtless an unfunny Chuck Norris formulation to be fashioned from that. If Verdasco is saying that he is a better clay-courtier than Raonic, then he isn't saying much. If he's saying that clay court tennis is more real than the varieties practiced on other surfaces, then he's saying rather a lot, but mostly it is rubbish. Either way, it begs the question, why is he in North America at all? There's a perfectly serviceable clay swing under way in the antipodes, with no dearth of rock-jawed Spaniards boasting pissweak serves and extravagant musculature, toiling mightily at their real tennis.

A Thousand Times Before

Regions Morgan Keegan Championships, Memphis

Roddick d. Tipsarevic, 6/1 7/6

Hewitt d. Mannarino, 6/7 7/5 6/0

Only fifteen minutes and half a dozen break points into Lleyton Hewitt's torpid encounter with Adrian Mannarino, I realised I was no longer watching for pleasure. Granted, I had just endured Andy Roddick prevailing over an ailing Janko Tipsarevic, which wasn't exactly a hoot, either. On reflection, I can admit I haven't enjoyed watching either of them in years. For Roddick, it was tour win no.564. For Hewitt, no.546. That's pretty much what it felt like. I've seen it all before, a thousand times.

They've faced each other on rather fewer occasions: twelve, to be exact, with six wins apiece. They will now meet in the Memphis quarterfinals. Who will emerge from their crucial thirteenth encounter in the ascendancy? At what point will Roddick blow his top, and start haranguing an official? Today he kept us breathlessly expectant until the second set tiebreak, when a stray forehand was called wide. Roddick simultaneously leaped skyward and hurled his racquet court-ward, then marched chair-ward and explained to umpire Fergus Murphy that this was actually a really important point. Murphy conceded the magnitude of the moment, but still thought the ball was out. Along with atmosphere, Memphis also lacks Hawk-eye, so there was little Roddick could usefully add, though as ever, the moment to let the matter slide was ignored. Eventually the American regrouped, his histrionics having served their purpose, and he took the match a few points later. The crowd was delighted, so much so that they forgot to stay for the following match, which really could have used the life-support.

Mannarino is a pleasant-looking lad, the kind you might know yourself, the friend you hesitate to introduce to prospective love-interests. He'll never be leading man good-looking, but with luck he could snag a sitcom part. As for the rest of his game, well, it's one only a fan could love. His forehand and second serve in particular are neither appealing nor effective, atavistic throwbacks to that innocent era when even top players could be self-taught. Hewitt mostly dealt with the second serve by backing his wheelchair around to take it on the forehand, although when he attacked with the backhand he achieved broadly comparable results - the returns were marginally less penetrating, but they had the virtue of being more in. The Australian dealt with Mannarino's awkward forehand not by attacking it - too obvious - but by largely avoiding it. Instead he fed balls to the Frenchman's stinging backhand. By the third set, his vision blurred by the dust of pulverised chances, even Mannarino's best shots could hardly find the court. It's just about possible that Hewitt knew what he was doing all along, but not likely.

It is a sure sign of Hewitt's decline that he is now often broken directly after he has failed to break his opponent. Great players know that even in failing to break, the pressure on their opponent accrues, the unlikely hold granting only a momentary surcease. The trick, following a squandered break opportunity, is to take care of

business on your own serve, and then get back to it. Everyone cracks, eventually. Hewitt was handed break points as fast as he could grasp them, whereupon he would handle them warily, never quite surmising that they represented an opportunity to actually break serve. Having failed to break, it just seemed inevitable that he himself would lose serve shortly thereafter. The commentators termed this 'against the run of play' - sounding shocked - but really mental lapses of this kind are no longer uncommon. To be a top player, you need to be brilliant or inexorable, and Hewitt was never brilliant. He was once inexorable, in his way, but he is not a top player any more.

Infinite Monkeys

In 2010 Roger Federer was defeated four times after holding matchpoint, an unhappy series of results that strikes many as another sure indicator of his accelerating decline. How accurate is this perception? The first thing to do is recall the matches (and the points) themselves. Briefly adumbrated, the details are thus:

- Indian Wells vs. Marcos Baghdatis, 7/5 5/7 6/7 (3 matchpoints)
- Miami vs. Tomas Berdych, 4/6 7/6 6/7 (1 matchpoint)
- US Open vs. Novak Djokovic, 7/5 1/6 7/5 2/6 5/7 (2 matchpoints)
- Paris Indoors vs. Gael Monfils, 6/7 7/6 6/7 (5 matchpoints)

It is tempting to search for a pattern here, a unifying reason to suggest what Federer is or isn't doing at these crucial moments. The first thing we can say is that these were all matches at important tournaments, against quality opponents, and that Federer was a single point away from winning each of them. Federer is a glass-mostly-full kind of character, and seems to view it this way. The second thing to note is that all but one of these matchpoints are break points, and thus sit comfortably within the narrative concerning Federer's general decline, which is something I've touched on before. (In case you're curious, Federer's break point conversion rate was 41% last year. In 2004, it was also 41%. It has never climbed higher than 44%, even in the years of his uttermost dominance.)

The temptation is to view these four matches as related, as a series that can reliably tell us something about Federer's form, or the way he approaches the crucial moments. The allure lies in the assumption that by analysing this pattern, the underlying issue can be isolated, and that it might then be dealt with. But is this assumption correct? Federer successfully closed out 65 matches last year. Over his career he has closed out 753 matches on the main tour. You'd have to think he's pretty good at it by now. He knows what he's doing. Against the four opponents with whom he had matchpoints but lost, Federer boasted a combined head-to-head of 29-6 heading in to those encounters. Excluding Djokovic, he was 19-1, while he had never lost to Djokovic in New York, and had beaten him just weeks before.

The point is, he knew their games pretty well, and probably felt he had a decent handle on how to close out matches against them. He knew that each of these guys would hardly hold back at the key moments (excepting perhaps Monfils), but that the margins grow pretty small when it grows this tight. But shotmakers are shotmakers because they make shots, and while doing so grows much harder while down matchpoint against Roger Federer, the chances of it happening are never going to be zero.

It is not unlike Rafael Nadal's improbable loss to Guillermo Garcia-Lopez in Bangkok last year, when the world No.1 came within a point of cruising to a routine win, *24 times*. There was really little Nadal could take from it. He failed to break two dozen times in a single set, but few of the points were alike, and some of his attempted winners missed by inches, if that. Isner d. Mahut has proved that sometimes the seemingly impossible is merely the ridiculously improbable. Given an infinite number of monkeys, two of them would eventually go 70-68 at Wimbledon.

This is not to say that Federer hemorrhaging matchpoints is especially improbable, or that it tells us nothing about his year. The point is that, duly isolated, these results do not constitute a meaningful pattern, and won't determine how he approaches these moments. After all, how many times last year did Federer *win* after blowing a matchpoint? How did Federer play on the matchpoints in all the matches that he won? Did he really approach these points differently five years ago? Personally, I don't know the answers, but I'm not sure I need to. It is enough that Federer does. The answers are tangled up like Christmas lights in the bramble of his mind, where -

in a twinkle - they help him to decide how best to approach any given opponent at any given moment. It's called experience, and while it might sometimes lead him into error, it wins him a lot more matchpoints than it loses.

A Radical Departure

Last week Robin Soderling claimed an indoor event in Western Europe, and Nicolas Almagro blitzed a clay court event in South America. Meanwhile in North America, Milos Raonic - the baby face that launched a thousand bandwagons - roared to his first ATP final, where he upset Fernando Verdasco, very much indeed. This week proved a radical departure: Verdasco was even more upset, and Memphis was Raonic's *second* ATP final.

Regions Morgan Keegan Championships, Memphis

Roddick d. Raonic, 7/6 6/7 7/5

Nominally a 500 level tour event, Memphis represented an increase in prize money over San Jose, but a solid downgrade in atmosphere, which I had believed impossible. It was also a step back in time, technologically, as befits a shift from Silicon Valley to Tennessee. Whereas the SAP Open featured HD streaming, or at least trickling, Memphis boasted only an ordinary stream, one largely unpolluted by the human gaze until Thursday, mainly through being unavailable. Most problematically, however, there was no Hawkeye. While its absence provided Andy Roddick's *raison du jour* to blow his stack, it was legitimately missed, especially when the semifinals featured Juan Martin del Potro and Mardy Fish in addition to Raonic and Roddick, all of whom carve the lines on serve. Furthermore, Fish, like Roddick, is a world-class bellyacher. Close line calls are mere grist for the mill. Without Hawkeye, the tournament is throwing the umpires to the lions. I can only imagine the strain in, say, Fergus Murphy's jaw from biting down on retorts, especially when Fish or Roddick launch into that fatuous and hackneyed aria, *'If I missed as many balls as you, I wouldn't have a job'*, from a discarded draft of *Così fan tutte*.

Presumably everyone has by now at least heard of Roddick's mad scramble and dive on championship point. It capped an engaging final, a throwback to those carpet-based serve-feasts of the nineties. Everyone bemoaned them at the time, in much the same way they miss them now. Raonic, No.152 some five weeks ago, has attained No.37. Compelled to qualify for the Australian Open, at the rate he's moving he'll be seeded for the French.

Open 13, Marseilles

Soderling d. Cilic, 6/7 6/3 6/3

Predicting how a tournament will play out based on the draw is the kind of amusing but pointless *divertimento* I only wish I had the time for. Nevertheless, a few weeks ago I confidently essayed the suggestion that Marin Cilic would be felled in the first round of Rotterdam by a qualifier. He wasn't, and progressed to the quarterfinals. It had seemed a safe enough prediction. His form, in lockstep with his ranking, was spiralling downward. The problem with this approach is that you never know when it's going to turn around. Suddenly, for no apparent reason other than that he probably heard about my prediction, Cilic looks a rejuvenated player. By making the final in Marseilles this week, with victories over Tomas Berdych and Mikhail Youzhny, he has reversed his slide and edged back to the cusp of the top 20.

At a set ahead and 3/3, Cilic wasn't a million miles from an improbable title. But Soderling has learned to win the matches he's meant to, mostly. Marseilles is his third title of a year that is not yet two months old, and he is looking alarmingly like a world No.4. It is as much in the way he carries himself as the results, and in many ways he is the most remarkable story in the sport. Two years ago, precisely no one saw this coming.

Damp Squibs

Dubai, First Round

I am quite taken by the stadium court at the Dubai Tennis Championships. Notwithstanding the fact that it is hemmed in by city, neatly wedged between the airport and a golf course, it feels from afar as though the desert encroaches. A sky swollen by endlessness, the open gradient of the very blue stands and the name Dubai; all conspire somehow to evoke Arabia. Perhaps I'm just giddy at the prospect of tennis before bedtime, visions before midnight, but my heart sang as the camera swept the stands, idle between points, and caught the delicate azure gradations of the seating, mirroring the sky like a pixelated oasis. It would only be ruined by the pulsing biomass of a vulgar crowd, by actual people actually showing up. Happily, the organisers found a way around this by apparently not letting anyone in. The players played on, and 5,000 pristine seats looked on, except for the red royal seats, which snickered amongst themselves, despite having the best view. The shadows of the flags atop the stands rippled on the court.

All of which is to say it looks like a postcard, which would be useful if there was anything to write home about. There wasn't. The most explosive line-up of first round matches since Rotterdam proved to be damp squibs, to a match. Only one went to three sets. Plenty didn't make it to two sets, or even one.

No less an authority than Lleyton Hewitt has anointed both Andrei Golubev and Marcos Baghdatis as 'tremendous strikers of the ball'. If balls are to be struck, then 'tremendously' is easily in my top three ways to go about it, although I'm not adverse to 'lingeringly' and 'infrequently', depending on the context. Baghdatis lasted four games until, doubled over as though struck tremendously himself, he handed Golubev his first 'win' of the year. On paper, Novak Djokovic versus Michael Llodra was a first round encounter to savour. On court, it wasn't. Llodra has made enormous improvements to his singles game in recent years, but against Djokovic he really could have used the extra guy. There was a Nenad Zimonjic shaped hole that Djokovic kept hitting balls through.

Roger Federer has just finished off Somdev Devvarman. Federer would insist, if anyone bothered to ask him anymore, that he never takes any opponent for granted,

that he approaches every match with due care. As a statement, it's crying out for an asterisk, and Devvarman is that asterisk. So much for old Federer. Yesterday, the new Federer Grigor Dimitrov played like the young Federer in going down to Richard Gasquet, who is now the old new Federer, but hopes in time to become the next Gael Monfils. He has the court positioning down pat, and the physical similarities are striking, though he does tend to break character by launching vicious backhands up the line. Meanwhile Gilles Simon celebrated the fact that the tour has moved outdoors by favouring moonballs that would have grazed the roof back in Europe. It was enough to earn a maiden win over Mikhail Youzhny, an astoundingly low quality affair. Simon afterward suggested that his play had been 'tactical'. That may be, but it was also 'very boring'.

Dreamboats

Acapulco, Quarterfinals

Nicolas Almagro, a six foot monument to meticulous grooming and preternaturally clear skin, would not look misplaced in that kind of daytime soap opera they used to have in the 1980s, which is to say the kind they have now, the ones in which all the men are named Rock and Beau, and the women are named Hope, or Chastity, or Buggery. Almagro was slightly ruffled in overcoming Santiago Giraldo in three sets today, but he never looked it. It must be disheartening to glance up after a desperate and extended rally and see that your opponent's hair has not moved. Say what you like about David Ferrer, but he looks like he's been through hell to win a match. Hell, he looks like he's forded the Styx. He's a dreamboat, to be sure, but one that's capsized.

There are a number of reasons why Ferrer vs. Almagro would constitute the dream Acapulco final. Some even involve tennis. Between them, they hold the last three titles. So far through the South America clay court season – the optimistically titled 'Golden Swing' – Almagro has looked a class above his fellows, with twelve consecutive wins and counting. As I've said before, he's the best claycourter in the world, until the better ones show up. In Ferrer, a putatively better one *has* shown up. (If rankings are any guide, Fernando Verdasco is also his superior. However, most of

Verdasco's points date from before Milos Raonic systematically dismantled his spirit, an event gorgeously timed to follow some promotional hagiography from the ATP's hype-machine, entitled 'The Best Is Yet To Come'.)

However, for Ferrer to find Almagro, he'll have to grind a way past Juan Monaco, against whom he somehow boasts a losing record. While there are such things as poor match-ups in tennis, for the life of me I can't imagine what it is about Monaco's game that realistically troubles Ferrer. Still, both guys are fleet over the surface, and neither possesses sufficient penetration to penetrate without first manoeuvring their opponent in to or out of position. In short, it'll be a long one.

The prize will be a shot at the striking Alexandr Dolgoplov, who today loitered transfixed as Stanislas Wawrinka fought a manful battle against himself, from which no clear winner emerged. The Swiss held four set points in the second, but he saved them via some enterprising errors, conjured out of nothing. The whole set proved a succinct summary of why Wawrinka has never made much headway beyond the 250 level: he's not good enough for long enough. For his part, Dolgoplov displayed typical flair, though he'll probably need more than the odd serve-volley against Ferrer or Monaco.

Almagro's path to the showdown is less cluttered with dud match-ups or unorthodox gringos. He faces Thomaz Bellucci in a dreamboat semifinal, for a chance at the dream final.

A Betrayal of Egalitarian Ideals

Dubai, Semifinals

Federer d. Gasquet, 6/2 7/5

When Roger Federer gifted a break of serve to Richard Gasquet in the second set of their Dubai semifinal, there was a collective worldwide exhalation as tens of thousands of the faithful emitted pent-up 'not-again' sighs. The global temperature subsequently rose about a tenth of a degree, and the polar icecaps receded almost a foot. Federer's mid-match mental sojourns have now grown to be such a factor that

even he is willing to discuss them, although their impact on climate change has been largely glossed over. This is not to say that the faithful were especially concerned over the result - it was Gasquet after all - but there is anxiety for what it betokens heading into the US Spring, and the clay season that follows. It is, naturally, another sure sign of his Decline.

Gasquet's fans, on the other hand, know that their hero gaining a break is only the necessary first step towards blowing it. His real goal is to break their hearts, again and again. No one has ever been in any doubt that Gasquet is skilled enough to occupy winning positions. So it proved again. Up 5/3 in the second, looking to force a decider, the Frenchman won only a handful of points before scurrying from the court. The flaccid break had been enough to galvanise Federer, and he and Gasquet thereafter toiled cohesively towards the common goal of securing a nice win for the top seed. When true professionals act in concert, there's seemingly no limit to how efficiently they can get things done. The last four games took about ten minutes.

Gasquet, who by winning just about anything would become a national celebrity, has once again inspired his share of opprobrium. This is patently unfair. Has it occurred to anyone that he is playing as well as he can? Clearly he has a mountain of talent, and a stellar backhand, but what in his history leads anyone to believe he has the mental fortitude to compete at the highest levels? Very few do, and that has always been the case.

The issue, as I've suggested before, is that fans tend to regard talented ball strikers as defective when they can't close out a set. But the top hundred features scores of men who can strike a tennis ball beautifully, but only a handful one would rely upon to close out a match. On this evidence alone, you'd have to say the latter ability is more precious than the former. Conversely, the tactically-sound, mentally strong player with limited weapons can't be lauded enough. Fans may patronise them, but they nonetheless respect them for doing the best with what they have. It reflects a paradoxical tendency to exalt talent over hard slog - a clear betrayal of egalitarian ideals, but our idols are not our equals. Federer of course is the most idolised of all, and he has consequently transcended 'talent'. He is a Genius, like Mozart, and apparently we need to be quiet while he works.

Djokovic d. Berdych, 6/7 6/2 4/2

In tomorrow night's final, Federer will face Novak Djokovic, who eventually overcame Tomas Berdych in what the Serbian later described without a trace of hyperbole as his worst match of the year. When he wasn't exploring a narrow corridor up the guts of the court, he was probing the middle of the net with his backhand. Berdych took the first set, but thereafter part of his leg stopped functioning properly - pardon the medical jargon - and he defaulted at 2/4 in the third.

The final is being heralded by most as a rematch of the Australian Open semifinal, even by those who otherwise insist that Grand Slam play is unlike any other type of tennis. With that said, the last time these two contested a 500 event was in Basel last October, when Federer defeated defending champion Djokovic in a see-sawing three set final. Fans can make of that what they will, but the correct thing to make of it is nothing.

That's What It's For

Acapulco, Final

(1) Ferrer d. Almagro, 7/6 6/7 6/2

For the second time in as few years, a Spaniard came within a single match of capturing three titles in the Golden Swing, which, as achievements go, hardly ranks up there with mapping the human genome. Despite its rather inflated title, the Golden Swing is merely three minor tournaments where no top players turn up, followed by Acapulco, where some of them do. You can probably guess which is the hardest to win. Anyway, last year it was Juan Carlos Ferrero who fell short, and this year it was Nicolas Almagro. On both occasions, David Ferrer arrived to rain on their parades; a Golden Shower, as it were.

I've already said that Almagro is the best clay courter going around, until the better ones come around. Trailing 2/5 in the first set, Ferrer looked set to make a liar out of me, or at least prove that even obvious sporting predictions are a fool's conceit. Little did I realise that in addition to being a barrel-chested hunk, Almagro is also a

performance artist of the first order. The court at the Fairmont Acapulco Princess was his canvas, and in that first set he performed for us a comprehensive retrospective of the career of Guillermo Coria. He commenced with electrifying early promise, looking for all the world like a premier dirtballer, before dissolving into a welter of mental collapse and double faults. A gritty fightback ultimately came to naught. It was a touching homage, although to be truly comprehensive he needed to get nicked and acquitted for nandrolone, graze a ballkid with his hurled racquet, and generally behave like a surly prat. Still, a solid effort, which doubtless owed much to the expert input of his coach, Jose Perlas, who briefly oversaw Coria's decline.

Aside from its artistic value, which was immeasurable, the Acapulco final was an excellent and dramatic match, the pick of the three finals played this weekend. As facetious as I am about the whole affair, Almagro is player I have plenty of time for. The trick, once the twin inconveniences of Indian Wells and Miami are dealt with, will be for him to retain form in Europe, to forge his way through tougher draws to final weekends, and there be mauled by Rafael Nadal.

Dubai, Final

(2) Djokovic d. (1) Federer, 6/3 6/3

Dubai ended as it began, promising much but delivering little. I can recall no stand out matches. At least the crowds picked up, although too many matches took place at night, in slower conditions, when the stadium could be anywhere. It is a lovely sight by day, with the gentlest haze softening the vivid wash of Arabian light, sharply relieved by the bold flower arrangements ringing the court.

For the second time in as many meetings, Novak Djokovic proved too potent for Roger Federer. Melbourne demonstrated what happens when Djokovic is outstanding and Federer is merely adequate. Dial down Federer's execution a few more notches –does it still do to 11? - and you have the Dubai final. Djokovic remained excellent, especially considering his weak effort against Berdych one day prior. He and Federer have clashed seven times in the last seven months, with the Swiss leading 4-3. Those matches have showcased every possible permutation of their respective abilities, besides the one I'm most eager to see. We've seen Federer scintillating (London), and Djokovic appalling (Toronto), and both guys nervous

(Basel). We've seen Djokovic solid and Federer distracted (New York). But we haven't seen them both firing at the same time. Given Djokovic's radical improvements of late, I hope we do, and soon.

Delray Beach International Tennis Championships, Final

del Potro d. Tipsarevic, 6/4 6/4

If you are pursuing a maiden ATP title, Delray Beach is as good a place to spend a week as any. That's what it's for, having previously launched the title-sprees of luminaries such as Xavier Malisse, Davide Sanguinetti and Kei Nishikori. The defending champion is Ernests Gulbis, who characteristically opted not to show up, preferring an early exit in Dubai, believing that the act of defending ranking points is a practice best left to the mentally sound. Besides Delray Beach, other important stops for the would-be titlist include Moscow and Rosmalen. These are the regular haunts of Janko Tipsarevic, whose notoriety as the best player without a title continues to swell. Indeed, it has now swollen to the extent that commentators the world over have apparently added it to their crib sheets, right below the fact that he actually reads Goethe and Dostoevsky, as though reading two of the most famous writers in history is an astounding thing for a person to do.

For the true believers, Juan Martin del Potro's first title since the 2009 US Open is a vindication of sorts. It wasn't pretty, but it was prettier than anything that happened for him last year. The way he kissed his wrist afterwards said it all. Sure, it's only Delray Beach, but he'll take it. That's what it's for.

Davis Cup First Round

Degrees of Impossibility

If ever a case could be made for the previous year's Davis Cup victor to be granted a first round bye the following year, this is the moment. Serbia will open its 2011 campaign against India, who long ago qualified as under-strength even when fielding its best players. Today India will be under-strength even by its own standards, having lost the star doubles combination of Mahesh Bhupathi and Leander Paes - the so-called Indian Express - neither of whom could obtain an exeat from his respective nursing home. Novak Djokovic took one look at the tie, and decided to grant himself a bye. The Serbian team will now be led by Victor Troicki, whom I would not want playing for my life, unless it was against Rohan Bopanna or Somdev Devvarman, in Belgrade. Having seen their prospects thus upgraded from 'utterly impossible' to 'ridiculously improbable', the Indians have allowed themselves a measure of hope. More fools they.

Lest it wasn't clear, I was using 'impossible' in something closer to its literal meaning, as opposed to Rafael Nadal, who appends the term capriciously to pretty much anything he might be expected to do on a tennis court, such as beating Tomas Berdych in the Wimbledon final. Speaking of Nadal, he'll be attempting to scale a virtual Everest in overcoming Ruben Bemelmans, ranked 144. The Belgian team features exactly one player inside the top hundred (Xavier Malisse), while the Spaniards have three inside the top ten. Notwithstanding the impossibility of the task awaiting them, Spain should also be gifted a first round bye. Really.

All of which is a way of saying the first round of the Davis Cup 2011 World Group is a waste of time. It is of course difficult - though not strictly impossible, even for Nadal - to see upsets coming, but even so predicting the winners requires no great display of prognostication. The only thorny ones are between Croatia and Germany, because both teams are primarily composed of mercurial headcases, and between Austria and France, because most of the French are injured. Sweden hosting Russia might have been interesting if Mikhail Youzhny hadn't withdrawn from Davis Cup, and Nikolay Davydenko hadn't taken leave of competitive tennis entirely. For their part,

Sweden has deployed a pair of Nordic sledgehammers in Robin Soderling and Joachim Johansson, who is certainly better than his ranking of 749, although no one really knows how much better.

If the expected teams progress through this round, expect to see some delightful quarterfinals in July. For now, if your country isn't playing, or you don't believe a post-nationalist sport like tennis should be yoked to an anachronistic patriotic agenda, or you just don't care for Davis Cup, well, it's probably better to join Djokovic in preparing for Indian Wells. Take the weekend off. Give yourself a bye.

Must Be Nice

It is a nice question which of this weekend's inevitable crop of bizarre Davis Cup results has thus far pushed eyebrows the highest. How about John Isner going down to Paul Capdeville in a tight five setter? The big Yank led two sets to none, from which point he lost serve once, and with it the match. Still, it was on clay, in Chile, and it was Isner. It was a result worthy of Ivo Karlovic, suggesting that while character may not be destiny, a one-dimensional serve-base game often is. For his part, Capdeville held his nerve very well.

I doubt anyone expected Adrian Unguar to grab a set from David Nalbandian, in Argentina. Word ahead of the tie was that Nalbandian was not well, and as the match wore on, he grew less so. Realistically, given the severity of his 'sports' hernia, he was lucky to drop only a set. He could well have left his undercarriage out there on the dirt. He's now out for Indian Wells and Miami, a cruel price to pay for a tie Argentina was always going to win.

On the face of it, I suppose Janko Tipsarevic going down to Somdev Devvarman in straight sets was a humdinger, though if anyone is going to go haywire in front of a boisterous home crowd, it's Tipsarevic. Being immensely well-read, it isn't out of the question that he has grown so preoccupied with deconstructing the very nature of sport and nationalism that he talked himself out of competing at all. Still, you'd think he'd be good for a set. Tipsarevic was philosophical via Twitter: 'Even when you feel and play like crap, your team mates are there to fix the problem. 2:1 Serbia ...

Idemoooo!;)). Must be nice. Prior to that tweet, his previous one was simply a link to an ESPN story about himself, which isn't the *least* self-aggrandising move I've ever encountered. It was the usual semi-literate guff, including the astounding news that Tipsarevic has momentarily put aside Nietzsche in order to read the bible. Far out.

My favourite result from the weekend so far was Amir Weintraub defeating Poland's Jerzy Janowicz in five sets. This tie has been weighing on Weintraub's mind since he received the call up to the Israeli squad, and it's satisfying to see that his introduction to Davis Cup has been so positive. He'll earn valuable ranking points, and even more valuable confidence. I'm looking forward to his next blog update.

Just Ask Your Pop

Davis Cup, First Round

The long crescendo transfiguring a dull murmur into a vast roar, stillness giving way to ripples as an exuberant *accelerando* tears through the throng. Patriotism granted a throat and a body: this is Davis Cup, in glorious *tutti*! Or it would be if you were not in the regrettably named and sterile Palace of Sports Lokomotiv, Kharkov, where about a hundred people witnessed Robin Haase's stirring recovery from two sets to love against Illya Marchenko in the fifth and deciding rubber. The Dutch contingent invaded the court, and formed a bouncing orange knot. The few Ukrainians in attendance milled about, certain only in their disappointment, having taken their cue from Marchenko, who'd looked equally lost and glum as the match wore him down. If the beginning of the weekend had been about odd results and brain explosions, it was ending with some gritty heroics. Nearby, in Estonia, Ricardas Berankis manufactured a desperate win from a couple of sets down, finally taking out the Dr Seuss inspired Jurgen Zopp 11/9 in the fifth. Still, like Ukraine, Lithuania weren't going to get it done with only one player.

Heading west to Ostrava, and Andrey Golubev played almost exactly like he always does, but for a minor adjustment that allowed his balls to land in. If pressed, he'd doubtless be unable to tell you what the adjustment actually was, and there's no reason to think it'll stick. But he'd also tell you he was pleased it happened today,

and won Kazakhstan the tie. For fans of Tomas Berdych, I wonder if it is more disappointing that he actually played decently, and was ultimately outhit. There is a seductive solace in poor form, since the only way is up. Losing while in good form brings one hard up against the awkward idea that your best may not be good enough. Still, Berdych is world No.7 for the time being, and Golubev is mired around 40. We're constantly told that the depth in the men's game is such that anyone can beat anyone on a given day. Today it was given to Golubev, who hit an astonishing 90 winners. It made for tremendous viewing, especially if you're a fan of flashy one-handed backhands. I am.

The US Spring (Part Two)

Luck of the Draw: Indian Wells 2011

When the draw for the Australian Open was released, several moons ago, there was a collective moan from avid draw-watchers in caves and forest clearings the world over, draw-watching being essentially a night-cult. Once again, Rafael Nadal had been placed in the same half as Andy Murray, who himself would have to plough through world No.4 Robin Soderling to get another shot at the Spaniard. Nadal's path to Murray led through any number of his hapless compatriots. Meanwhile, in the lower portion, Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic shaped up as likely semifinalists, again . . .

This was not the first time this configuration had emerged. As it turned out, nor was it the last. Indian Wells has arrived, and here we are again. If you didn't know better, you'd think it was rigged. Many fans clearly don't know better, and stern attacks on the sport's integrity are again thickening the ether. The discursive styles of hardcore sports fans and conspiracy theorists are generally pretty alike, anyway, so it's nice when they get to be both at once. The fix is in.

If Federer and Djokovic get that far, their semifinal will decide the No.2 ranking, which the ATP is hyping mightily, as though the rankings will then be frozen for eternity, or as though Djokovic didn't spend half of last year at No.2. If they get that far, it'll be worth talking about then. In the meantime, there is no shortage of imposing figures in their path, and a nebulous expectation that Djokovic's imperious form can't last forever. There is a potential for Federer to meet Milos Raonic in the fourth round - beware the hype - and almost anyone in the quarterfinals. Watch out for that one. With three or four wins under their belt, anyone can be dangerous.

Soderling's cut of the draw is once again tough and chewy, suggesting that whoever is fixing these draws isn't a fan, or a very mindful chef. To get a chance against Murray, he'll likely have to win a third set tiebreaker over Philip Kohlschreiber - their matches invariably fly to the wire - as well as some unholy combination of Alexandr Dolgoplov (remember Melbourne), Ivan Ljubicic (defending champion) or Juan Martin del Potro (who may have pulled out). Meanwhile, it is hard to see anyone

troubling Nadal before the quarterfinals, where he will quite possibly collide with David Ferrer, having honed his skills on a host of sundry Spaniards. On an astoundingly slow hardcourt - more blue clay - settle in for a long night.

When Violinists Attack

Indian Wells is now under way, and the considerable anticipation generated by the year's first Masters 1000 event has only sharpened, although it has been tempered by frustration born of the fact that nothing will be televised until Saturday. As I write, Juan Martin del Potro is serving up a break at 3/2 in the first set against Radek Stepanek. Surely no one would want to see that.

Certainly Qualified

Qualifying is of course complete, having provided a level of excitement commensurate with the coverage: the field appeared uncharacteristically weak, with a typically heavy local contingent. Since I'm not American, I'm not legally obliged under the Patriot Act to care about Donald Young either way. Apparently he is a figure of some controversy in those parts of the world not afforded the same luxury. My right to indifference has been exercised heavily of late, especially since I watched him whine and slouch his way to a straight sets capitulation to Marin Cilic in Melbourne. Anyhow, he made it through qualifying, and has now progressed through the first round with an apparently decent win over Potito Starace (who still doesn't yield 'potato starch' when googled).

Young was not unique in this achievement, given that four other qualifiers won their first round matches. This seemingly confirms the view that progressing through qualifying instils match toughness. I can't refute this, but I will add that the '96' draw, whereby all 32 seeds receive a first-round bye, tends to foster this kind of result, since none of the qualifiers have to face anyone fearsome. The first round becomes a kind of super-qualifying round. The real action gets underway when the big boys turn out on Saturday, which explains why there's no coverage until then. I still don't like it.

The only other thing to add is that Grigor Dimitrov must be kicking himself - or a nearby official - at his decision to remain in Europe rather than front up for qualifying. There's hay to be made in the Southern California sunshine, and he is precisely the kind of guy at the precisely the stage of his career when he should be making it. Last week he won the Cherbourg Challenger with a terrific performance over Nicolas Mahut, but his decision to play Sarajevo rather than Indian Wells ranks down there with spending February in Europe rather than North America. Emulating Federer will only get you so far. Even playing like him won't be much good if you're in the wrong place. At least he's down to play qualifying in Miami, where he'll doubtless prove me completely wrong.

When Violinists Attack

There is an old joke in classical music circles about violists being failed violinists. It is unkind, though whatever claim it may have on being funny is due to a discomforting proximity to the truth. (Conceptually, it isn't any great distance from the line about drummers being the guys who hang out with musicians.) The assumption is that given the choice, most people would choose to play the violin over the unwieldy viola, but that most violists don't have that choice. It is a formulation that transfers readily to tennis, regarding doubles players. It is equally unfair, equally unkind, and about as true. We can argue until the cows return that doubles is a specialised skill, requiring hair-trigger reflexes, carefully executed tactics and preternatural communication skills, and it all sounds pretty convincing, until empirical evidence proves otherwise. Empirical evidence usually arrives in the form of a couple of top singles players pairing up for a week, and winning an event merely through being better tennis players. When it comes down to it, wouldn't the Bryan brothers rather be top singles players? From this perspective, Indian Wells will this week be little more than a test laboratory for this theory, like CERN for doubles.

Of the best ten singles players in the world - that is, the best ten tennis players - nine are this week entered into the doubles tournament. The only guy missing is Andy Roddick, who of all the top ten finds himself at the net the most, and could really use the practice. But he has a metric shitload of points to defend in the next few weeks, and has wisely chosen to direct his energies as efficiently as possible. Anyway,

everyone else has found a partner, and looks poised to wreck the week for the established teams. Never before has the concept of seeding looked so meaningless.

The top-seeded Bryans doubtless fancy their chances against the Scandinavian throw-together of Soderling and Nieminen, although second seeds Nestor and Mirnyi might not against Federer and Wawrinka, who you might recall took the Olympic doubles gold back in 2008. The dynamic Polish pairing of Frystenberg and Matkowski, seeded fourth, will encounter Nadal and Marc Lopez, who are the defending champions. Ouch. Djokovic and Troicki compose another fearsome and makeshift duo, while Andy Murray and brother Jamie have played and won together plenty of times before. Meanwhile, Melzer and Petzschner should be safe against Ferrer and Almagro - though you never know - while Llodra and Zimonjic will presumably have little trouble disposing of Isner and Querrey, neither of whom looks much like a singles, or even tennis, player right now. Other teams to beware of: Berdych and Tipsarevic, Dolgopolov and Malisse, Cilic and Karlovic.

There's every chance the doubles tournament could prove more interesting than the singles. We can only hope they show some of it.

The Roger Federer of Tennis

Indian Wells Doubles, First Round

Federer / Wawrinka d. Mirnyi / Nestor, 6/1 6/2

Nadal / M.Lopez d. Frystenberg / Matkowski, 7/6 7/6

Who among us doesn't love to be right, even about something as inconsequential as sport, and even about something as uncontroversial as the declaration that Roger Federer is a good chance to win his first round match? Yesterday I suggested that the Indian Wells doubles event, unusually bloated with top shelf singles talent, would provide clear support for the theory that top doubles players thrive only because top singles players generally have better things to do. (It's all vaguely reminiscent of that delectable moment in 2006 when Gael Monfils entered a paddle tennis tournament

for a lark, and proceeded to beat the 'world No.1' Scott Freedman, otherwise known as the 'Roger Federer of paddle tennis'. Good times.)

Proof has arrived in short order, with the news that the second seeds Nestor and Mirnyi were summarily thrashed by the Roger Federer of tennis and Stan Wawrinka, 6/1 6/2. The fourth seeds Frystenberg and Matkowski also fell to Nadal and Marc Lopez. A Fedal semifinal is not out of the question, or even unlikely. As expected, Melzer and Petzschner scraped through against Ferrer and Almagro. As unexpected Isner and Querry beat Llodra and Zimonjic. Djokovic and Murray carried compatriots and/or siblings through. The Bryans will likely do the same against the replacements for Soderling and Nieminen: Raonic and Feliciano Lopez. Now there's a remake of *The Odd Couple* begging to be made. Lopez was seeded for the Australian Open, and Raonic had to qualify. Now the Canadian is ranked higher. I wonder if they share a laugh about that during practice, or whether they just stand around admiring the Spaniard's thighs.

Anyone Has His Day

Indian Wells, Second Round

Those who either love or hate Rafael Nadal - equally absurd positions way out on the fringe of reason - would have charted his likely course through the Indian Wells draw the moment it was released. Certain reefs would have been apparent immediately: Marcos Baghdatis in the fourth round (extreme minds leap to Cincinnati last year, when the Cypriot served Nadal from the court); David Ferrer in the quarterfinal (fresh memories of Melbourne, Nadal hobbled and Ferrer inexorable); and a semifinal against Andy Murray or Robin Soderling. It looked manageable, but hardly foregone. The fringe-dwellers saw enough to nourish their respective hopes, whatever they may be. Then today happened. As days of tennis go, today at Indian Wells has been about as shocking as having a battery of electrodes attached to your testicles (women may substitute a delicate protuberance of their choosing). Soderling aside, Nadal won't be facing any of those guys, primarily because they are no longer in the tournament.

Devvarman d. Baghdatis, 7/5 6/0

To the lately distended list of strange and inconsequential outcomes I never thought I'd see, I can now add Somdev Devvarman bagelling *anyone*. To call his game pedestrian is to do walking an unkindness, although I cannot fault his application. Still, if it was to happen it would have to be against a shotmaker not making his shots. Thus afflicted, Baghdatis resorted in due course to throwing haymakers, but none of them found their mark. From 5/5 in the first set, having already refunded an early break, he won precisely zero games, for no good reason. Fitness played no part: remember the compelling video the ATP released about Baghdatis doing a million sit-ups on the beach? As far as I can tell, this updated, sleeker Baghdatis seems rather less effective than yesteryear's superseded model. He is now 6-5 for the year, including two retirements and this latest 'effort'.

Karlovic d. Ferrer, 7/6 6/3

Another entry for the list: Ivo Karlovic out-muscling David Ferrer from the baseline. Expert opinion heading into this match was sharply divided as to whether Karlovic would go down in three tiebreaks, or two. In other words, he basically was no chance, although what chance he did have would obviously involve serving his way to breakers, and lucking a few returns. His career is predicated on this tactic, and partially explains why his ranking is a stellar No.239. Today he served at 58%, with only nine aces and a handful of double-faults. Mind you, Ferrer managed only 46%, though it felt considerably lower than that. Karlovic was actually cracking winners off the ground - including some sumptuous backhands - and volleyed with deft aplomb. Having been denied a wildcard into qualifying for Miami next week, he has a point to prove, and a ranking to improve.

Young d. Murray, 7/6 6/3

If the sadistic fundamentalist manning those electrodes suddenly cranked up the voltage, it might evoke something of how this result felt. The shock was so great that waves emanated outward to rapidly engulf the tennis world. Fears that an Australian Open final loss would again propel the Scot into a precipitous dive have proved founded, despite his insistence to the contrary. Murray hasn't won a set since the semifinal in Melbourne. That says a lot. What says even more is that before today,

Young hadn't won consecutive matches at tour level in three years. Now he has. I could say that Young was ripping his forehand, and he was. But even ripped, his forehand is not very good, and Murray's impressive Masters 1000 record was built on absorbing and subverting the ripped forehands of Roger Federer and Nadal. He has much to think on. Young, for his part, has permitted himself a mere touch of optimism. They *have* been tough years.

Nadal d. de Voest, 6/0 6/2

For those pundits eager to insist that the depth in men's tennis means that anyone can beat anyone - and I'm mostly sympathetic to this view - days like today are grist for the mill. As the seeds toppled, it was clear that even anyone can have his day, and that when he does, even the somebodies should step warily. Sadly no one told Rik de Voest, who could manage only two games against a charitable world No.1. Then again, it's pretty hard to imagine the kind of day the diminutive de Voest would have to have in order to trouble Nadal further. Nadal was in so little trouble tonight that even he was willing to concede the point. Next up he'll face Ryan Sweeting, who in full flight makes de Voest look like an in-form Marat Safin. Nadal's real challenges were due to begin in the fourth round, but now they will likely be delayed until the semifinals, if not later. To his zealots, who are legion, the screams of seeds being mowed down was sweet music. To his detractors, the sense of stifled outrage is searing in its severity, the purest rush known to the anti-fan.

A Sobering Memento

Indian Wells, Third Round

Kohlschreiber d. Soderling, 7/6 6/4

Nadal d. Sweeting, 6/3 6/1

For the first time in their rivalry, Robin Soderling and Philip Kohlschreiber failed to go the distance, largely because the distance lay somewhere deep in the Swede's forehand corner, and he could no longer push effectively from his left foot. Yet he toiled valiantly, and even hobbled was no certainty to lose. The scoreline, if chanced upon five or thirty years hence, will suggest another close encounter between

matched foes. Fated to live now, we see it as yet another example of the tough match-up that defies common sense. Their rivalry pre-dates Soderling's ascension to the elite, and even now only extends to five matches. Indeed, we could hardly term it a rivalry at all, but for the curious fact that their first four meetings all went to deciding breakers, and that Soderling only won the last of them. Like Roger Federer's issues with Igor Andrejev or Gilles Simon, explanations abound, but even in their ponderous totality these seem insufficient to adequately explain the superior player's problem. Like that scruffy boyhood friend you somehow retain even as you accrue wealth and fame - I naturally speak from intimate experience - Kohlschreiber seems destined to remain a foil for Soderling no matter how accomplished the latter becomes, a sobering memento from the bad old journeyman days.

With Soderling's loss, the last realistic impediment to Rafael Nadal reaching the Indian Wells final has been removed. Now that Fernando Verdasco and Gilles Simon have lost, even the unrealistic impediments are looking thin on the ground. Nadal remains the sole top twenty player in that half of the draw, and next faces Somdev Devvarman, who at No.84 will be by some margin the highest ranked player he has faced so far. Meanwhile, yesterday on the bottom half of the draw all but two of the sixteen seeds progressed, and the two that didn't were hardly contenders, and fell to decent young prospects on the make. Those of us hoping to see the world No.1 challenged even a little are surely justified in our disappointment.

del Potro d. Dolgoplov, 7/6 6/3

The only credentialed player likely to emerge from the Murray-Soderling quarter of death will be Juan Martin del Potro, who today looked assured in his win over the flamboyant Alexandr Dolgoplov, in much the same way Marat Safin never did against Fabrice Santoro. One suspects del Potro's demons are different to Safin's, even following a hellish year. Aside from his first serve, which eventually decamped for good as he served for the match, del Potro's game is looked increasingly solid. The forehand is still there, with its incongruous little flourish on the take-back, and its breath-taking pace. Some today, as he lost patience with Dolgoplov's sophisticated noodling, returned me to the 2009 US Open final. One of the game's signature shots has returned, when there was every reason to believe it never would.

Real Tennis Ensued

Indian Wells, Third Round

The last two unseeded players in the draw's bottom half collided this morning, and it turned out to be the match of the day, although this is not an especially compelling accolade. No other match reached a deciding set. (There have been two-set classics, it's true, but none of them occurred today.) Today was one for the true-believers, especially those of Richard Gasquet, Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic, who were all fearsome.

Harrison d. Raonic, 7/6 4/6 6/4

The unseeded players in question were Ryan Harrison, an eighteen-year-old American on the slog to notoriety, and Milos Raonic, who is a pretty big deal already. Raonic's pre-match favouritism owed less to his shiny new ranking - No.34 - than to his power and composure. He has both in buckets, which porters cart around behind him. Nonetheless, the younger player was not overwhelmed, and looked quite composed himself in stepping in to take Raonic's vicious deliveries on the rise. To say it was an impressive returning display does the performance inadequate justice. It was a downright admonition to Raonic's recent opponents. I'm not mentioning Fernando Verdasco specifically but . . . well, I just did. Once the Canadian's serve is back in play, it turns out real tennis ensues. The real tennis was excellent, a testament to both guy's widely overlooked prowess off the ground. Harrison's go-to play generally involves hurtling netwards, and taking his licks. That said, his baseline endeavours boast variety of the old-fashioned kind, the kind everyone once had before Fabrice Santoro annexed the very concept, and everyone else gave up on it. It's a long way of saying he's talented.

Federer d. Chela, 6/0 6/2

Djokovic d. Gulbis, 6/0 6/1

Federer's first set against Juan Ignacio Chela was vintage stuff, insofar as I imagine it recalled any of the other six times he hasn't lost to the guy. I won't pretend to have seen them all. The second set was merely very good. I may be reading it wrong, but Federer seems like a bad match-up for the Argentinean. Meanwhile, Djokovic's

egregious mental lapse in the second set against Ernest Gulbis ruined his chances of dishing up a double bagel. Gulbis for his part was impeccable, posting the sorts of numbers hitherto unseen in professional tennis, at least not since Jimmy Connors once played an exhibition against a standard poodle. Gulbis was more successful on Djokovic's serve than his own, doubtless because it allowed him to remain still and randomly windmill his racquet about. This tactic payed rich dividends at the net, where his vast wingspan made him a fearsome sight, lustily thrashing about. It got him a game.

Doubles Is Cool

Indian Wells, Quarterfinals (& Doubles Semifinals)

Every form of human endeavour falls prey to loopy fashions from time to time, and tennis is hardly exempt. Some trends - like garish headbands or Feliciano Lopez - are destined not to last. Others endure. Think of pissweak commentary and inside-out forehands. Those are forever, the very furniture of the sport. Only time will tell if the latest craze sweeping Indian Wells will catch on: a top player deals a lesser compatriot a stern hiding, before then taking him under his wing for a therapeutic doubles match later in the day. The ball commenced rolling some days ago, when Novak Djokovic thrashed Viktor Troicki love and one (a bagel-breadstick combination much favoured by the senior Serbian this week), whereupon they embraced heartily and paired up, only to go down, humiliatingly, to some actual doubles players.

Today it was Roger Federer's turn, registering another routine quarterfinal victory over Stanislas Wawrinka, before the Swiss pair fronted up for the most anticipated doubles match of recent times, against defending champions Rafael Nadal and Marc Lopez. Sadly for the cool-hunters praying this malarkey might catch on, and thus justify the fact that cool-hunting is even a *thing*, Nadal had not hammered Lopez in singles earlier that day, although given the way Nadal's draw has panned out this week, it wouldn't have been entirely out of the question. For the record, the Swiss team won. The commentators are fond of declaring that they play a 'traditional form of doubles', which is patently false. The full-time doubles teams play a traditional form of doubles, which is why there are none remaining in the tournament. Federer

and Wawrinka play like top singles players who can volley, which is why they're in the final.

At a change of ends in the second set the organisers unleashed the Kiss Cam, proving once more that there is nothing people can't be induced to do, so long as they are commanded to via a Jumbotron. Last night a bold but plain lad proposed marriage via the big screen, a move of surpassing cheesiness that was hardly out of place in Southern California. I'm sure months from now as they thrash out their divorce settlement, they will look back fondly at the moment when he ambushed her in front of 10,000 roaring strangers. (Jumbotron obsession was a phenomenon brought home to me whilst attending an NBA game in Boston one year, at which a zero-intensity crowd would periodically erupt whenever the words 'Go Crazy' flashed across the big screen. For the chance to be shown on the big screen, people were duly and actually going crazy, capering and gibbering like lunatics, until the time out ended, and they returned to their erstwhile somnolence.) Perhaps Miami, not to be outdone, will deploy a Nipple-slip Cam, or a Lobotomise Yourself With A Hacksaw Cam. What price 'fame'?

Commentary gem of the day: 'He looks like a sword fighter out there. It looks like the racquet's part of his hand!'

Second Comes Right after First

Indian Wells, Semifinal

Djokovic d. Federer, 6/3 3/6 6/2

By defeating Roger Federer in the second of today's Indian Wells semifinals, Novak Djokovic regained the No.2 ranking. Tomorrow he will face world No.1 Rafael Nadal in the final. If Nadal wins, it would be his first title since Tokyo last September, and his first Masters 1000 victory since Madrid in May. For Djokovic, however, it will be his first Masters title since the Paris Indoors in November 2009, which is also the last time he progressed to the final round. In other words, there's plenty at stake.

I've suggested recently that the numerous Djokovic-Federer encounters - eight of them since Wimbledon last year, split evenly - have showcased every possible permutation of their respective abilities, except the one that matters most. We have not seen them both performing at their peaks for a whole match. After today, I suspect we won't, because they can't. Federer's game is built around near-relentless attack, while Djokovic's rests upon spectacular defensive movement and the saintly patience with which he continually resets each point. When both are operating at full throttle, it makes for some spectacular points - there were some jaw-droppers today - but it cannot be sustained. Something usually gives, and then something else does. Their matches are invariably marked by sudden and definitive momentum shifts. Again, today was no different.

A great deal depends on the conditions. On a fast court, Federer's offence gains a serrated edge. On a slower court, the edge is merely ragged, and Djokovic grows increasingly impenetrable. It isn't the whole story, but no synopsis would be complete without it. Indeed, it is revealing that today's result is a near-mirror of last November's Basel final, which Federer won 6/4 3/6 6/1. That was a fast indoor court, momentum oscillated dramatically, and Djokovic fell apart in the final set. Today the reverse occurred. Federer had seemingly wrested back control when he broke to love early in the third, then moved swiftly to 40-15 on serve. From there, he never looked in it. As with his opponent in Basel, Djokovic did little to impress in the closing stages, and indeed was nearly broken while serving for it. Nonetheless, Federer was by now too frustrated for a fightback, and it was Djokovic pummelling his chest and bellowing sweet everythings at the crowd some minutes later.

This sense of frustration is worth dwelling on, for it unlocks the issue. Rather too much is made of unforced errors - Federer himself has always been more willing to commit them than ruminate on them - especially their perceived equivalence to winners. The relationship is vaguely indicative on an industrial scale - say, across a season - but is generally worse than useless within the scope of a given match. Federer hit something like 15 unforced errors in the first set today, which suggests that his level was poor, although it wasn't. Few of those errors came early in the point. Most came at the end of protracted exchanges, in which Federer would repeatedly probe the lines and corners, only to have the ball reappear up the centre

of the court and land within a yard or two of the baseline, with his opponent flowing smoothly back into position. Federer wasn't trying to hit winners with these shots, but he was trying to manoeuvre Djokovic out of position. In tennis parlance, he was trying to gain 'progress', playing slightly within himself. Djokovic was a wall, however, and Federer's margins evaporated as he vainly sought any opening. Having to operate at that level is demanding, and mentally exhausting. By this reckoning, it's unfair to even call these errors unforced. Whatever they were, they earned Djokovic the first set in short order, and really bore fruit later in the third, once Federer fell decisively behind.

The second set saw an adjustment from the Swiss, ironically because Djokovic began to up his pace after sweeping so effortlessly through the first. Forced to defend, Federer began to employ far greater variety. Djokovic has never been especially impressed when Federer comes over his backhand, but the slice is a more wily beast. It is arguably the finest slice in the game today - one of the few worthy of the name - and forces Djokovic into choices he doesn't like to make. Invited to attack, he opens himself to counter-attack. He must generate his own pace, which he can do, but would prefer not to have to. Suddenly the gaps that Federer had striven so mightily and fruitlessly to create were there in abundance. For the rest of the set, Federer flowed into them, romping home with a couple of breaks.

The third set reprised the rhythms of the first, but altogether sloppier. Djokovic returned to his defensive play, but was nowhere near as decisive, and Federer, sadly emboldened, went back to attempting to hit through his opponent. The set featured 16 unforced errors from the Swiss, but now they were happening nearer the beginning of the point. They were truly unforced. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Federer got this match tactically wrong, and that his Annacone-inspired 'new' aggression has come at the cost of his essential variety. This isn't to say that a workable balance isn't possible - there was an excellent chip-charge late in the match - but that Federer needs to recognise that outside of a few select hardcourts, Djokovic just cannot be hit through. He is simply moves too fast, too beautifully, and never misses. They sound like worthy attributes for a new world No.2.

An Imperial Victory

Indian Wells, Final

Djokovic d. Nadal, 4/6 6/3 6/2

Is it fitting, or merely coincidental, that the last two men to defeat Novak Djokovic in a tennis match were Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal? Perhaps it's both, or maybe it doesn't matter. The losses occurred last November, at the O2 Arena, but they feel like ancient history, as though they happened in the Colosseum. Not the ruined one, mind you; the original one, the one in *Gladiator*, that film in which Russel Crowe embodies a Spaniard so convincingly that he has to be referred to as The Spaniard, and visits on the Roman Empire a level of ferocity usually reserved for recalcitrant concierges. Today Nadal was more believably Spanish, but otherwise fell short of replicating Crowe's endeavours. *El guerrero imparable fue detenido*.

He was stopped, of course, by Novak Djokovic, who has now won something like 20 consecutive matches (counting the Davis Cup, but excluding the Hopman, as the cognoscenti are wont to do). An imperial victory today delivered the Serbian his sixth Masters 1000 title, recovering from a set down, and romping home in the decider. He looked exactly like the best player in the world on hardcourt. It was a particularly slow and bouncy hardcourt, admittedly, but he still looked like the best player on it.

Nadal and Djokovic present an intriguing match-up, one that I am generally determined to savour. Like Andy Murray and Juan Martin del Potro, the Serbian's exceptional double-fisted backhand largely negates Nadal's great strength, which is the humming, curled forehand rearing at the right-hander's left shoulder, forcing them into a lateral stretch and a literal retreat: across and back, until he puts you away. Boasting the kind of technique that can withstand the many thousands of RPMs Nadal inspires on the ball, Djokovic stands his ground, even redirecting those balls up the line. Thus limited, Nadal is compelled to expand his game and improvise, to seek alternative means of spreading the court. He is good enough to do it, and watching him figure it out is where the interest lies.

Having said that, as determined as I am to enjoy the match-up, I invariably don't. It is very disappointing, much like reclining on the couch to watch the big game with a

bag of pretzels, and then realising that you don't much care for pretzels. Theirs is a rivalry that for sheer volume surpasses Nadal-Federer, yet there have been almost no outstanding matches, and I have forgotten neither the overrated US Open final of 2010, nor the allegedly epic encounter in Madrid, in which an entire suite of commercials could be aired between each point. They play slow, but that's hardly the issue. The real issue is that they rarely play well for long at the same time.

So it proved again today. Nadal was excellent in the first set. Djokovic was superb in the last, which is obviously when it matters most. Both underwhelmed in the second, although by serving at 25% Nadal ensured he would win the race to the bottom. For a wonder, Nadal didn't rebound the way he usually does. It's worth remembering that only days ago he scrapped home against Ivo Karlovic by the narrowest of margins. Indeed, it should be borne in mind that Nadal hasn't claimed a title since Tokyo last year, and that the highest ranked player he has beaten this year is Marin Cilic, whose ranking week-to-week only bears a tangential relationship to form or ability.

Nevertheless, the clay season is mere weeks away. Nadal has a phenomenal number of points to defend, but who is willing to bet he won't defend most of them? Djokovic may be the master of the hardcourts, but we're about to be reminded what surface dominance really is. By the time The Spaniard returns to Rome, he may be, once more, unstoppable.

Scary Canary

Miami Masters 1000, First Round

Del Potro d. Mello, 6/4 6/4

Insofar as anyone can look ominous in canary yellow, Juan Martin del Potro is looking ominous at the moment. Thankfully, he is, like Roger Federer, favouring Nike's more appealing visually-dense yellows, as opposed to the lurid travesties lately unleashed by Lotto. And he is leagues from the sartorial train-wreck that adidas has inflicted on Fernando Verdasco, an outfit that may take some attention away from what's on his head, but sadly can't help with whatever is happening in it.

Then again, having chosen to look like a watermelon cross-bred with a swarthy pineapple, perhaps it is only fitting that the Spaniard plays like one.

Anyway, back to the ominous del Potro, who is looking so formidable not because he is producing consistently astounding tennis but because he is astoundingly consistent: he is beating everyone he should. This is about the last thing you can reasonably expect of a guy returning from a career-threatening injury. Indeed, he is making the comeback trail look considerably smoother and straighter than he has any right to, since it's mostly fashioned from loose shale, skirts any number of precipices and snakes through the odd minefield. There are plenty of opportunities to misstep. I can hardly recall a player stepping so suavely or surely.

He was ranked No.484 as recently as six weeks ago. At the time I hazarded the amazingly controversial opinion that this ranking was not a true reflection of his ability. My views, tentatively proffered, were met with howls of indifference, but I now stand vindicated. Following his semifinal run at Indian Wells last week, he looms on the cusp of the top fifty. I'm willing to stick my neck out again, and suggest that with zero points to defend he may go even higher after Miami. Take that to the bank. If, like last week, del Potro navigates another quarter of death - including Philip Kohlschreiber and Robin Soderling back-to-back - he will return to the top thirty.

Anderson d. Davydenko, 6/4 6/3

If that happens, he will pass Nikolay Davydenko, who proved so utterly impenetrable when the two last met in the season finale's final back in 2009. Davydenko improved his ranking by about three spots in losing to Kevin Anderson today: he too has no points to defend. As a former Miami champion, he presumably had plenty of pride at stake, but whatever existential malaise is now afflicting the Russian has grown so consuming that pride wasn't sufficient to get it done. Davydenko's wrist injury was nothing like as severe as del Potro's, yet in some way that no one has yet fathomed, it appears it was much, much worse. For so rare and gifted a player, one who has ever been denied his due, this strikes me as a surpassing shame.

Candles to the Sun

Miami Masters 1000, Second Round

Bogomolov Jnr d. Murray, 6/1 7/5

As he did last year, Andy Murray made it all the way to the second round in Miami, but no further. Today he fell in straight sets to Alex Bogomolov Jnr. He probably wouldn't have troubled Bogomolov Snr, but at least he has defended his points. Indeed, if Robin Soderling loses before the quarterfinals - and he nearly did earlier - Murray will move back up to No.4, which tells you something about how closely ranking correlates to form. Really though, Murray was fortunate to survive the first round, notwithstanding the fact that he is seeded and had a bye. Nothing is a given right now.

Statistics don't always tell a story, or at least the right story, but in this case they are indicative: Murray committed 32 unforced errors - recall that his is a low risk game - and was broken in seven out of ten service games. Bogomolov's career-high ranking of No.97 attests to his prowess on return. It is a nice question whether this loss will hurt more than the one to Donald Young in Indian Wells. It probably doesn't matter. The prevailing view is that both results are candles to the sun when compared to the Australian Open final.

Widespread opinion is that it was his defeat to Novak Djokovic in Melbourne that propelled the Scotsman into this lugubrious swan-dive down the form ladder. This assumption forms the foundation for the various theoretical and psychological edifices constructed atop it, the most common being that folding to Djokovic was more traumatic than either of the two major finals against Roger Federer. The latter is a legend to whom there is no shame in losing, whilst the former is a peer and - until recently - a fellow member of the also-ran club. As explanations go, it sounds pat, which is a good reason to be suspicious of it. Is it actually right? How do we really know when a slump begins, or even why? Surely it is at least as accurate to say that Murray's current woes began with the semifinal victory over David Ferrer. If we take a longer view still, we can see that he hasn't exactly been captain reliable for some time now, hardly impressing against Alexandr Dolgoplov in Melbourne, or even against, say, Nicolas Mahut at the Hopman Cup. He was up and down at the

World Tour Finals, and mostly down in the weeks prior, losing early to Monfils in Paris, Monaco in Valencia, and Ljubicic in Beijing. The shining exception was his frighteningly complete title run in Shanghai, where he trounced an in-form Federer with a thoroughness even Djokovic can only envy.

Anyone else in the top ten would immediately decamp to Europe - doubles be damned - praying that a change of surface might be just the ticket. Even Federer took that view last year. Unfortunately, the *terre battue* has never been Murray's terrain of choice, and the kind of game it requires is precisely the kind of game he now lacks the ticker for, as we say in Australia. Perhaps, like last year, he will turn things around on the grass, but it's hardly guaranteed, and there are likely to be a lot of dud results before then.

Andujar d. Verdasco, 3/6 7/6 6/4

Granollers d. Wawrinka, 6/0 6/7 6/3

Still, Murray was hardly the only allegedly formidable player to go out today. Fernando Verdasco proved resourceful in overcoming a one set advantage, thereafter deploying double faults with the surgical precision of the Dresden firebombing. There was no live coverage, but I'm confirming reports that several of his double faults occurred in his opponent's service game. As I say: resourceful. It was Pablo Andujar's second ever hardcourt victory. Not to be outdone, Stanislas Wawrinka celebrated not having to face Federer in the quarterfinals by ensuring he won't have to face anyone. The bagel was a deft touch.

It's also worth mentioning that with Milos Raonic's loss to Somdev Devvarman, the much-heralded next chapter of men's tennis has been almost entirely expurgated from the Miami draw. Lest you've forgotten who I'm talking about, here are their names in no particular order: Bernard Tomic, Ricardas Berankis, Jack Sock, Grigor Dimitrov, Donald Young, Ryan Harrison, Ryan Sweeting. If they were an outlaw gang, they'd be called The Wildcards.

The Whiff of Gotterdammerung

Miami Masters 1000, Second Round

The seeds continued their jolly tumbling today at the Miami Masters 1000. Of the 32 who slugged their way past first round byes, 14 have failed to progress past actual opponents. As attrition goes, it's hardly the Somme, but it's the quality of the fallen more so than their volume that has caught the eye, and the relative minnows they've fallen to.

Cuevas d. Roddick, 6/4 7/6

Today's big story was defending champion Andy Roddick going out in straight sets to Uruguay's finest, Pablo Cuevas. There were mutterings that Roddick did not receive the home crowd support he might have hoped for, and that the majority in attendance were cheering for the other guy. The implication, if I read it aright, is that Miami has a large Uruguayan population, so it kind of sucks for Roddick that he ran into the only one in the top 400. Really, the crowd was the least of his worries. He was not well, too unwell even to properly harangue the officials when the opportunity inevitably arose (i.e. when he fell behind). To be fair, he tried, but without Fergus Murphy in the chair he simply couldn't muster the rage.

Even had Roddick been healthy, it would have been a close run thing. Cuevas was striking the ball with rare authority, and serving with a muscular kick, especially to the ad court. I suspect a healthy Roddick would have gutsed out a win, but we'll never know. He looked pretty disconsolate fronting the press afterwards, although he was more voluble than is often the case following a rough defeat. This was especially commendable given that he was the defending champion, and that he had to field endless queries about his health, well beyond the point at which he'd insisted there was nothing more to say. Losing today means shedding almost 1000 ranking points, which means he'll plummet out of the top ten, landing somewhere around No.13, his lowest ranking since July, 2002. Remember that *cool visor*?

Federer d. Stepanek, 6/3 6/3

Nadal d. Nishikori, 6/4 6/4

Djokovic d. Istomin, 6/0 6/1

It is a testament to their astonishing consistency that neither Rafael Nadal nor Roger Federer ever succumb on days like this, when the whiff of Gotterdammerung perfumes the air, that noisome musk as the bodies of lesser gods pile up and go bad in the Miami heat. Federer hasn't lost to anyone outside the top 100 in about six years, and Nadal in about four. Novak Djokovic is now looking similarly invincible: while Soderling struggled and Murray, befuddled, exited, the Serb notched up yet another 6/0 6/1 scoreline. These are happening so regularly that that single game conceded is coming to look like charity.

For those interested, Federer is sporting some swish new duds. It feels like years since he's gone collarless in singles. I'm not sold on the peach wrist and head bands, but that shirt is splendid. It was brought up in his press conference today, and what little can be said about the choice of a tennis outfit was amply covered, including the news that it is a one-off for this tournament, and the vaguely depressing revelation that he picked it out a year and a half ago. Federer also made some interesting points about the slowness of the Miami court, and the onerousness of daily media commitments.

A Real Mouth Opener

Miami Masters 1000, Third Round

The commentary gem of the day arrived courtesy of the ever-reliable Jason Goodall: 'For lovers of talent, it's an eye-watering prospect!' He was spruiking the up-coming clash between Alexandr Dolgoplov and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, whose skills are impressive, no question, though I couldn't see what there was to get all weepy about. Sadly, by the time the talent entered the ill-lit stadium, Goodall was no longer around to explain himself. The best stream I could find featured a commentator I once described as 'Ray Romano hosed down with boring', mainly because I don't know his name. I've since endured his stylings a number of times across several tournaments.

Shunning - or shunned by - company, he invariably flies solo, which is a shame. Lacking the capacity for tonal variation, he could really do with a booth-partner, provided it wasn't actually Ray Romano. As it was, it felt like the call was being phoned in by Manny the Mammoth, and was primarily composed of an extensive recount of each player's results for the last six months. It wasn't eye-watering, but it was mouth-opening, insofar as it provoked an escalating series of yawns.

To be fair, the tennis wasn't helping. There's no doubting Dolgoplov and Tsonga are talented, but so was Andrew Ilie. Unless they're executing they can frankly look poor. Neither could find his timing early on, and the Ukrainian's passes on the backhand side were perpetually spraying wide, so I suppose it is to Tsonga's credit that he largely directed his approaches there. When he didn't, he got scorched. The rain arrived at 4/4, and everyone's eyes got wet, so I suppose Goodall was somewhat vindicated. Dolgoplov broke quickly once play resumed, but apparently didn't care for it, and broke himself back even more quickly. Tsonga won the tiebreak, but lost the second set. Rain again intervened, and they're currently locked on serve in the third, due to complete their night match in the apocalyptic haze around lunchtime tomorrow. The victor's reward will be a shot at Rafael Nadal about sixteen minutes later. I expect a close one.

Rochus d. Youzhny, 1/6 6/3 6/3

Speaking of which, is it just me or is rather too much made of the conditions in Miami? Today in Melbourne it was 27C and about 82% humidity: a gorgeous autumn day. Meanwhile in Miami it was (apparently) 29C and a number of very healthy young men were out on their feet in deciding sets. One of them was Mikhail Youzhny, who fell to a resurgent Olivier Rochus, the sole remaining qualifier in the draw. It recalled several of Youzhny's recent losses, especially against Gilles Simon in Dubai, particularly in its *looseness*. As with so many attacking players, when the Russian's form dips he grows ragged if too many balls come back. Today, conditions were slow, and Rochus ran his wee buns off. I haven't watched Rochus play since he saw off Juan Martin del Potro's aborted comeback in Bangkok last year, and as ever I was struck by how dynamic he is on court, how complete his repertoire is, and how assured his shot selection. One of my guilty pleasures used to be watching the diminutive Belgian give Marat Safin fits.

Vintage Stuff

Miami Masters 1000, Fourth Round

Federer d. Rochus, 6/3 6/1

'This is looking like a mismatch, as though Rochus has brought a knife to a gunfight. Federer just has too much firepower.' Robbie Koenig.

We don't expect much from tennis commentary - and generally receive less - but we expect it to be right, and this was spot on. Roger Federer was in rare form, the kind that used to be common. Come what may as the clouds of seniority gather, it's reassuring to know he can still put on displays like this. Play commenced a touch beyond 12:30am, and ended 52 minutes and 32 winners later, including a rare drop-lob off the frame. Federer and Olivier Rochus have played longer games of cards. In fact, they probably played a few tonight as they waited (and waited) to get onto court.

Despite the late hour, plenty of fans had remained in their seats, many having lapsed into comas as Sharapova's earlier double-fault exhibition entered its fourth hour. Federer gave those who regained consciousness no reason to further regret their misfortune. It was vintage stuff, just like his opponent. Still whatever Rochus' shortcomings - and being 5'5" and 30 are not advantages - he is a spry mover, and has built a laudable career around tenacity and the capacity to retrieve plenty of balls into awkward positions. But when you're hitting those balls as well as Federer did tonight it hardly matters. And the conditions at night are *slower*.

Nevertheless, as a form guide, it is arguable just how useful this match is, particularly with sterner challenges ahead. Federer was magnificent, but a reasonable number of those winners would not have been winners against, say, Novak Djokovic, whose retrieval skills are frankly unparalleled. Will Federer be able to maintain this standard of aggression when it takes twelve shots to find the opening, rather than four or five? Can anyone?

Simon d. Tipsarevic, 4/6 7/6 6/2

He'll get a practice run against Gilles Simon in the quarterfinals, who today pushed Janko Tipsarevic over the edge, and I use the term 'push' advisedly. For players of

the attacking disposition, an extended tussle with Simon must feel like being beaten to death with feathers, especially on a surface as unhelpful as Miami's. Tipsarevic could get balls past the Frenchman, but only after a thoughtfully constructed 16-stroke rally, and even then by aiming for the outside of the line. For a couple of sets, it worked, but then his patience ran out.

Berdych d. Mayer, 6/3 2/6 7/6

Fish d. del Potro, 7/5 7/6

I must confess to finding Tomas Berdych no less robotic now than the first time I saw him play, over six years ago, which confounds the usual process by which players gain personality as our intimacy with their sport increases. The first set today was played entirely on Berdych's terms, meaning it was conducted almost exclusively via the enchanting medium of flat, hard baseline rallying. They were not attractive terms for Florian Mayer, who was frankly foolish to think he could beat Berdych at what he was programmed to do. In the second set, after a rain delay, Mayer came out with a new game-plan, one devised around *his* strengths, moving the Czech around, mixing up paces and lengths. The second set was entirely played on the German's terms. So was the third, but he couldn't find a break. Berdych took the tiebreak, and let out a mighty roar. It sounded almost human.

Mardy Fish occupies the other end of the personality spectrum, although his undeniable charm when away from the court does not excuse a tendency to behave like a thug whilst on it. He is very much in the Roddick-mould when it comes to browbeating the officials, and I wonder if they rehearsed any of their tirades back when they roomed together. Today Fish beat the resurgent Juan Martin del Potro, which pretty much everyone in the world is treating as an upset regardless of their respective rankings, including Fish: 'It's only a matter of time. If you're not in the top five in the world, you can just add a number to your ranking because he's gonna be up there in no time.' Eloquent, as always. Nonetheless, they are clearly good friends, which Fish discussed happily after the match, but which was already clear from their embrace at the net.

Game Over: Nadal and the Machine

Miami Masters 1000, Quarterfinals

Nadal d. Berdych, 6/2 3/6 6/3

After some encouraging early success, the tennis engineers - or 'Tengineers' - who are responsible for maintaining and upgrading Tomas Berdych have had a difficult time of it. There have been setbacks, but this is only to be expected. Following some very positive developments last year, there are indications that a breakthrough is not far off. Lest one feels inclined to question the endeavour, we have only to look at IBM's eight year journey with Deep Blue - from concept to controversial victory over Garry Kasparov - to feel reassured that ultimate success is its own sweet reward. From a programming perspective I imagine tennis presents greater obstacles even than chess. For example, Deeper Blue, the machine that eventually overcame Kasparov, was capable of calculating up to twenty moves ahead. Berdych still struggles with one. To be fair, Deep Blue was tasked with little else, while Berdych also has to run, strike a tennis ball very hard and flat, and change facial expressions, sometime as often as twice in a minute. But the Tengineers have been undaunted in their labours, and the signs are there that Project Berdych is back on track, notwithstanding a serious bug that halted progress in the second half of 2010.

After losing nineteen consecutive sets to Rafael Nadal, Berdych today took one, and could well have taken two if not for a unfortunate malfunction late in the piece. As in the famous series of matches against Kasparov, the Tengineers were permitted access to their charge between sets, in order to recalibrate as they saw fit. They saw very fit after a disastrous first set, and it proved decisive, as he swept through the second. However, at 3/4 in the third, Berdych began to exhibit strange behaviour - almost signs of free will, a ghost in the machine - and promptly suffered a meltdown. The Tengineers afterward declared that a faulty transistor was to blame, and that rumours of human interference (or personality) were patently false. Indeed, human interference was limited to Nadal, who had his shoulder seen to by the trainer several times. When the Mallorcan served three aces to escape 0-40 as the deciding set got under way, our faith in human fortitude was vindicated. For now.

Federer d. Simon, 3/0 ret.

The question was posed, as poor Gilles Simon was lustily booed from the stadium today, whether the crowd would have been less incensed if the Frenchman had called the whole thing off prior to appearing on court. Is a walkover preferable to a token effort? Having already endured a WTA match, it's not like the crowd was getting a refund either way. Really, the question is beside the point. What the crowd wanted was for Simon to be fit and play a good match against Roger Federer, who is one of the guys that transcends the sport. Seeing Federer play is one of those arbitrary things people have on their bucket list, like swimming with dolphins, or reading *Ulysses*. A tennis crowd is not terribly different from any other kind of mob, and similarly infantile in its moods. They were booing Simon because they were jacked off, and he was the clearest target.

The upshot is that Federer is through to his thirteenth consecutive semifinal, where he will play Nadal. Opinion is sharply divided as to whether a free ride through the quarters will prove a help or a hindrance. With Federer, especially these days, there's just no way of knowing. Interviewed on court after his unexpectedly epic match against Simon back at the Australian Open, Federer half-joked that he hoped never to play Simon again. Well, someone up there likes him. Or maybe they don't like Simon. Maybe they were in the crowd today, hooting smugly as the Frenchman ambled from the court.

Aura of Invincibility

Miami Masters 1000, Semifinals

Nadal d. Federer, 6/3 6/2

Of the four guys who contested the semifinals of the Miami Masters today, only one of them played to his abilities. Unfortunately for Roger Federer, that exception was Rafael Nadal. Consequently, their result looked more or less foregone by the time Nadal broke for a second time to take the opening set, and didn't take much longer to become a fact.

If we consider Federer's four losses this year - three to Novak Djokovic, and now one to Nadal - in none of them did he play anything like his scintillating best, and so it's hard to fault him when he goes on insisting that his best is still good enough. It probably *is* still good enough, but that isn't really the problem. The real issue is that his best is not being produced when it matters most, when facing the sternest opponents at the pointier end of the draw. That's what isn't good enough, though you have to figure the opponents have something to do with that. They're exactly the wrong guys to face when you're having an off day.

It's worth mentioning the Miami surface, but only because others have. It's more worthwhile to discount it as a factor. The dreaded purple clay clearly favoured Nadal, but equally as clear was the fact that the match was nowhere near close enough for it to matter. Equally we could say that Nadal was lucky in saving the only breakpoint he faced (and he was, clipping the tape on an overhead to wrong-foot Federer). But the fact that he faced no other breakpoints had nothing to do with luck, and everything to do with a prudent gameplan executed diligently.

The gameplan was simple enough that Nadal could adumbrate it in a few short sentences in his exceedingly gracious post-match interview: serve a high percentage of first balls to Federer's backhand, go deep to said wing whenever he could, and stay away from the forehand. Insofar as Federer's forehand was often in play, we could say that the Spaniard wasn't wholly successful, but that is to quibble. In any case, no small proportion of Federer's heroic 38 unforced errors came from his feared forehand, so there was no harm done, at least none to Nadal.

Djokovic d. Fish, 6/3 6/1

Notwithstanding a certain similarity in the scorelines for today's matches, the encounters were nothing alike. As alluded already, neither Djokovic nor Mardy Fish were particularly impressive today. The difference is that the Serb boasts any number of backup plans to which he can resort, and nearly all of them will see off most of the tour, whereas Fish today would have struggled to beat James Blake. Blake, for interest's sake, was the last man to supersede Andy Roddick as American No.1, while Fish is the latest. Blake's success was built around blistering court-speed and a ferocious forehand. Fish's success is built around everything *besides* speed

and a forehand. The superficial comparisons are endless, and not very diverting. More meaningful is how both men rely on near constant attack, and how impotent they look when it's just not happening. Blake's malingering career has become a set of bombastic yet fragmented variations on this very theme. Today we were treated to an alternative rendition.

The extent to which it wasn't happening for Fish was hardly short of astonishing. It is not uncommon for fans of all sports to insist that an opponent did nothing special, and that their favourite player or team really beat themselves. But Djokovic *really* didn't do anything special, and I would hardly claim Fish as a favourite. I could say Djokovic simply got the balls back, but that's often all he does, and it is something one can do more or less well. Generally he does it very well indeed, but not today. Fish - ever the aggressor - was creating no shortage of openings, even on big points. Faced with hectares of open space, Fish would go for the lines, but unfortunately not the lines that border the singles court. Presumably Djokovic's notorious new aura of invincibility was scrambling the radar in the American's head.

A Mind Free From Doubt

Miami Masters 1000, Final

Djokovic d. Nadal, 4/6 6/3 7/6

It is a curious and mutable nothing, that gap between success and failure. The margins on a tennis court are notoriously minute, but the margins in the mind are vanishingly small, thrumming fluctuations in probability and the dance of schizoid quanta. The former, in clumsy inches, separate desperate wins from squalid losses, or Philip Kohlschreiber from either, but missing a line here or there won't gainsay greatness. For Novak Djokovic, the latter, immeasurable, separates a disappointing 2010 from the greatest season opening since 1986. He travelled nowhere, yet, *mutatis mutandis*, he discovered a mind free from doubt.

This new Djokovic *looks* strikingly like last year's model. The strokes are about the same - the un-kinked serve was in place long before the Davis Cup final - and his movement was always fleet and economical. The difference is that Djokovic now

plays the wrong shot far less often than his opponents do, which doesn't sound especially impressive until we recall who his opponents are, that the window in which players may deliberate is well shy of a second, and that the clarity of his thinking is matched by the confident assurance of his execution. It is possibly the least exciting variety of excellence imaginable, and to the casual observer certainly lacks the charm of Federer's torrents of winners, or Nadal's martial physicality. But consider the near-perfection of Djokovic's toil: when do you see him attacking the wrong ball, or playing the wrong type of defence? Unless driven by the uttermost need, he hardly strays from an optimal court-position. There are errors, naturally, but there are almost never mistakes. Indeed, his shot selection appears so right that in immediate hindsight it looks obvious, so obvious that you're compelled to wonder how his opponent failed to cover it.

They fail to cover it because, beset by their own issues, they aren't thinking anything like as clearly as Djokovic. Right now, no other tennis player on Earth makes the best decision so consistently, and then executes so appropriately. He never looks to be red-lining his play; everything is contained, flawless. Permitted so few free points, one can only imagine how exhausting it is to play against. Actually, one doesn't have to imagine. One had only to look at the normally indefatigable Rafael Nadal as today's final came to a head, deep in the deciding set. Nadal has built a career on outlasting the other guy, but today, after only three sets in reasonable conditions, he was spent and the other guy looked pretty chipper. The points had been predictably physical, but as ever both availed themselves of extended breathers between each one, and it was only a three set match. Nadal is famed for his prowess in running down opponents in fifth sets, but this was a different matter. Once Djokovic got his act together halfway through that first set there was hardly a moment at which the Spaniard might safely drop his guard.

Come the final tiebreak, has Rafael Nadal ever seemed so crippled by doubt? His backhand was impressive when he went after it. There was an audacious cross-court winner at 15-15 5/6 in the third set, suggesting a clear way forward. But Nadal *knows* that the backhand is always the first of his shots to break down, and he consequently seemed to expect it would, and grew cautious, a testament to the doubt worming through his mind. The slice that he'd earlier deployed to contain

Djokovic - with some success - was now used constantly for no good reason, a clear sign of muddled thinking. Each second serve return looked like a second-guess, and it proved no surprise when a flurry of studiously wrought backhand errors saw him yield momentum, capped nicely by a double fault. The irony is that when he went after it, his backhand looked quite fearsome. All the belief was now up the other end.

Four match points came, and two departed. The crowd, perhaps the most rambunctious in tennis, went predictably bananas. His cushion halved, Djokovic looked utterly calm. He knew something we didn't. With iron certainty, he knew he could beat Nadal. The gap between belief and execution had shrunk to nothing, and the lightness of the eternal victor was his.

Hardcourt Retrospective

As the tour descends with wrathful inevitability upon the dirt of southern Europe, and thence the grass, the time seems apposite to look back at the prolonged hardcourt season just ended, the one that began in Atlanta last July, and concluded a few days ago in Miami. It is a useful way to view the tennis season, as a near-perpetual hardcourt marathon punctuated by those brief hothouse months on the traditional courts of the Old World, with the year-end break merely the longest of several afforded to worn players, and inflicted on eager fans. Viewing it this way allows for a slightly longer perspective, which is always the first thing to be lost when a player goes on a monumental tear.

1. Rafael Nadal

Rafael Nadal's hardcourt season was not world-beating in and of itself, but it was an improvement on the previous year's, and coupled with his prodigious results on clay and grass, meant that the world was actually beaten. The highlights, of course, were completing the career Grand Slam in New York, and progressing to the final of the tour championships for the first time. Besides the US Open, he only claimed one other title (Tokyo), and thus hasn't hoisted a big trophy since October. He is unique among the top players in that the majority of his points were earned between April and July, which is hardly a coincidence, since by winning everything he left bugged-

all for anyone else. This means that his maintaining his ranking depends on winning everything again over the next few months, although only the stupid or the brave would wager against that happening, at least on the clay. His overall record for the hardcourt season was 53-9 (.827).

2. Novak Djokovic

There's not much left to say about Novak Djokovic right now, good or bad, well or poorly. Dominance of this level naturally inspires rhapsodic hosannas, from the most jaded hacks up. If Serbia has a national poet, there is doubtless an epic in the works. Djokovic's racquet sponsor (Head) will presumably release immaculately produced footage of their star reciting it whilst suspended by his nipple-tassles from a helicopter. The main thing to bear in mind - a murmured caveat amidst the Wagnerian chorus of approbation - is that although Djokovic has compiled an astounding 26-0 record since the World Tour Finals, he was a more down-to-earth 30-8 before that, although in his defence six of those losses came courtesy of Federer or Nadal. The point is, things change.

His overall hardcourt season record thus comes in at a very healthy 56-8 (.875), and 50-2 against the *hoi polloi*. Of course, since the WTF he has achieved a fearsome parity, squaring the ledger perfectly against Nadal and Federer, inflicting two and four defeats respectively. He won five titles, including the Australian Open, back to back Masters in Indian Wells and Miami, and 500 events in Beijing and Dubai. It's quite a haul, and he is deservedly the man of the moment.

3. Roger Federer

When people aren't chanting Djokovic's name in close harmony, they're composing obituaries - either gleeful or threnodic - for Roger Federer. Consequently, it's important to bear in mind just how good Federer has actually been of late. He accumulated 7,520 points in the hardcourt season, only 370 less than Djokovic, and 1,450 more than Nadal. Of the 13 tournaments Federer contested since Wimbledon, he reached at least the semifinal at all of them, and took five titles, including the Year End Championships.

His overall record of 57-8 (.877) was the best on the tour, and bears closer examination. When not playing Nadal, Djokovic or Murray, his record was an

astonishing 51-1, with his only loss coming to Monfils at Bercy, after holding five match points. His record against his peers is 6-7 (4-4 against Djokovic, 1-1 against Nadal, and 1-2 against Murray). Furthermore, his 2010/2011 hardcourt season saw him gain 1,665 points over the previous year. However, he failed to pass the semifinal stage at either of the majors, thus providing adequate fuel for the argument that he's done for.

4. Andy Murray and 5. Robin Soderling

Everyone is on Andy Murray's case a bit right now, and probably not without reason given that he hasn't claimed so much as a set since the Australian Open semifinal, and that he's been losing to duffers. But it is worth noting that his 2010/11 hardcourt season was an overall improvement over the previous one: he is 390 points ahead. In the upper ranking tiers that hardly amounts to much, but it was enough to retain the No.4 ranking he held last July, by a meagre 125 points over Robin Soderling. The perennial narrative is that Murray is underachieving, and that the jolly Swede emphatically isn't. Until either of them bags a major that probably won't change. For his part, Soderling's big haul came with a maiden Masters title at the Paris Indoors, although he also claimed three smaller titles earlier this year.

7. Tomas Berdych

I enjoy making fun of Tomas Berdych, and even whilst crunching the numbers I find it hard to rid myself of the suspicion that his ranking is not a true reflection of his ability, which means far more than the capacity to strike a tennis ball. We'll know either way once Roland Garros and Wimbledon come round - where his big hauls reside - but it's worth conceding that he made a laudable attempt to defend his Miami final. His hardcourt season was, believe it or not, an overall improvement on the year before, by about 120 points, which is a pretty amazing feat considering he barely strung consecutive wins together in the latter half of 2010.

11. Mardy Fish

Despite poor showings at the two hardcourt majors, and missing both of the indoor Masters events, Mardy Fish put together an eminently memorable hardcourt season. This owes in large part to a truly forgettable one the year before, and to shedding some 30 pounds of ballast, which allowed him to rise 38 places. The highlights were

a final in Cincinnati, and a semifinal at home in Miami. The upshot is that he is now the highest ranked American male.

13. Andy Roddick

Roddick's latest departure from the top ten has inspired profound repercussions on those nearby. Fernando Verdasco has risen two places to No.8, despite being 550 points leaner than he was when the hardcourt season began. Fish, as mentioned, has claimed the top American spot. While Roddick has almost nothing to defend in the upcoming clay swing, there's no reason to think he'll improve on that, though he'll be hoping to cash in on the grass, much like he didn't last year. At 29, and with an increasingly sombre game built around guiding every point slowly through all seven stages of grief, it's a dicey question whether he'll feature in London come November.

16. Viktor Troicki, 18. Richard Gasquet and 19. David Nalbandian

Aside from Mardy Fish, the three biggest arrivals into the top twenty have travelled strikingly different paths: finding ones feet, returning from injury, and being Richard Gasquet, in no particular order. Nonetheless, all three are united by how little their ranking owes to strong performances at big events, a testament to the relative scarcity of points available in this range. However, it also means that their ranking is more stable than those reliant upon a freakish run at a premier event, such as Ljubicic, Berdych or Melzer. Those guys can fall away very suddenly, indeed. For Troicki, Gasquet and Nalbandian, however, death will only come via a thousand cuts, and it's just as likely that points dropped here will be matched by gains elsewhere. Those critical of Troicki's game would do well to bear his fundamental consistency in mind. As for Gasquet, well, anything might happen there.

33. Kevin Anderson

The belief was widespread, although not generous, that Kevin Anderson claiming the SA Tennis Open back in February said more about the event than about the player. There were even murmurs that his victory was the final nail in the camel's back. The tournament is no more. Having sat courtside as Anderson succumbed pointlessly to Blaz Kavcic in Melbourne - it was on the court adjacent to one where I shared an awkwardly Seinfeldian half hour with Mikhail Youzhny - I was sympathetic to this most unsympathetic of views. That all changed in Miami, where he produced a level of tennis worthy of the top ten. Unfortunately he produced it against Novak Djokovic,

so he lost 4 and 2, but he gained a lot of fans. Naturally, everyone his size has a monster serve, but unlike Isner and Karlovic he is solid off the ground, and boasts surprising agility for his dimensions. Clay doubtless won't be kind to him, but he would be justified in looking forward to the grass, and beyond to the North American summer.

41. Ivan Ljubicic

In stark contrast to the players discussed earlier, Ivan Ljubicic's high ranking of the last twelve months was largely buttressed by his extraordinary triumph in March 2010, an Indian Wells Summer for a nice guy in the twilight of his career. He scored a victory over Andy Murray in Beijing last October, which used to be a sweet achievement before Young and Bogomolov soured it for everyone, but otherwise his hardcourt season emphatically underwhelmed. At 32, a return to the top 20 is a long shot, about as long as beating Nadal and Roddick to capture a Masters title.

42. Nikolay Davydenko

By some cosmic coincidence, it transpires that the answer to Life, the Universe and Everything is the same as the question of what happens when the most finely calibrated ball striker in tennis goes off for an extended period: 42. Unlike Ljubicic, Davydenko's high ranking was based around consistently strong results at prestigious events, including victories at the Shanghai Masters and the World Tour Finals. To be where he is has required playing poorly for a long time. Something has gone missing from his immaculate game, and none of the explanations sound at all convincing.

64. Lleyton Hewitt and 68. Radek Stepanek

A pair of tour stalwarts, precipitously tumbling some 30 to 40 ranking spots. Age shall weary them, and break them, it turns out. At the end of a long decade, in which one has overachieved and the other hasn't - which is which? - the only remaining constants are the hideousness of Stepanek's shirts, and Hewitt's blithe insistence that he remains a force at the majors. One is painful to look at, the other awkward to hear. That said, for Hewitt the highlight of his hardcourt season was a surprisingly successful and generous commentary stint in the Australian summer, although he wore a little thin once the supply of anecdotes dried up.

35. Milos Raonic and 70. Grigor Dimitrov

Of the young guard, the Wild Cards, it might seem counter-intuitive to lump Raonic and Dimitrov together, but I do have a point to make, since there are comparisons to be made. Both young men have improved their ranking by over 230 spots since last July. The volume of praise lately heaped on Raonic exceeds the amount of disappointment and disapproval directed the Bulgarian's way, although the latter quantity is not inconsiderable. Raonic has of course had the stronger results - a fourth round at the Australian Open, a title in San Jose, and a runner up in Memphis - although Dimitrov has been no slouch. People say he should prove himself on the Challenger tour, so he does well in Challengers. No, he should be trying his luck against the big boys on the tour! So he plays qualifying, and battles through consistently, including strong fields in Rotterdam, Dubai and Miami. But that isn't good enough, either. Obviously at some point he'll have to start winning main draw matches, since Challengers and qualifying will only get you so far - about No.70, by some coincidence - but he is only 19. Naturally, the archetype of the all-court *wunderkind* breakthrough is Federer downing Sampras on Centre Court a decade ago. As an image of the guard changing, it is hard to top for succinctness.

Six months ago, when Raonic was Dimitrov's age, the Canadian was ranked No.200 in the world. Since January, he has put together a run even tour veterans must envy (especially Janko Tipsarevic and Florian Mayer). The slow courts of Indian Wells and Miami were less kind to his game, although his loss to Ryan Harrison in California was an honourable one, which I'm sure was an enormous consolation. Arguably, his greatest achievement was the systematic annihilation of Fernando Verdasco's will to compete.

The Clay Season (April – July)

Back and Forth

US Men's Clay Court Championship, Quarterfinals

Karlovic d. Isner, 6/7 7/6 7/6

As advertisements for professional tennis go, you could probably come up with something less enticing than Ivo Karlovic versus John Isner, but you'd have to get creative. It might possibly involve Radek Stepanek in a backless frock. Still, if ever a claycourt encounter was going to evoke the halcyon days of grass court tennis in the mid-90s, this was it, so that's another thing to tick off my bucket-list.

It had it all: aces, torrents of games without a return finding the court, and very tall men trudging back and forth along the baseline. The dirt naturally blunted the serves, although both men's returns proved equal to sharpening them up again. The final tiebreak made it to nine all, and Karlovic saved a couple of match points and duffed one with a double fault, but it still wasn't exciting. The thrill of a tiebreak owes a great deal to the tension of the set that built up to it. When the tiebreak feels inevitable, the games become superfluous, their only function to get each server's eye in.

Some masochists are already envisaging a potential Wimbledon encounter between this pair, where pundits will presumably be able to buy some commemorative slacks to match their 'I Survived Isner - Mahut' t-shirts, thus completing the outfit. I think there was an 'I Slept Through Clement - Santoro' beret from Roland Garros a few years ago. Speaking of clothes, given Karlovic's capricious sense of humour, is it beyond hope that he gets '7-6' embroidered onto his shirt somewhere, much like 'RF' or 'Nole', though without the self-importance?

Nishikori d. Fish, 6/3 6/2

By winning the Houston event, Mardy Fish would have moved into the top ten for the first time, just a week after he became the top American. Given that he has almost no points to defend until Queens, it's a pretty safe bet that he'll get there sooner rather than later, though it'll be later than this week. Today's befuddled loss to Kei

Nishikori didn't look like top ten material, except that the top ten currently includes Verdasco, Monfils and Melzer, and they play like this quite often. Fish will fit right in.

For his part, Nishikori was as appealing as always, spry as a whippet and launching groundstrokes whose penetration was entirely out of proportion with his size. How does he do it? I asked this question of a friend recently, and he replied that timing is the answer, which wasn't much of an answer at all. It's barely a step from saying he hits the ball well because he's good at hitting the ball.

The Sin of Pride

US Men's Clay Court Championship, Final

Sweeting d. Nishikori, 6/4 7/6

Ryan Sweeting is a generally unappealing piece of work, and perhaps the most ironically named tennis player since the diminutive Sebastien Grosjean bestrode the court. At least, on his day, the Frenchman *could* be great. A 6'5" sourpuss, sweet the American is *not*. Even winning his first tour final before boisterous compatriots in straight sets, he found plenty to moan about: his equipment, the conditions, the court, even the compatriots, who nonetheless remained mostly thrilled at the elementary coincidence of sharing a country of origin. Say what you like about the American Davis Cup team, but they are a pretty upbeat lot when they congregate, spear-headed by those psychotically positive Bryans. New title or not, hopefully attitude counts as much for Jim Courier as it did for his predecessor, and Sweeting won't be permitted so much as orange-boy duties.

The final itself was of low quality, a fact made plain by the result. Sweeting's game is based on the concept that even pretty good players can't play well all the time, and this week he struck pay-dirt. He was marginally more aggressive than has hitherto been the case, but there are limits to these things. It was Kei Nishikori's match to lose, though this is merely an observation, and not, as Nishikori seems to have taken it, a recommendation. Mostly, it was an opportunity, and not only to claim a second ATP title, but to realise the portentously named Project 45. Project 45 is the dream whereby a Japanese male tennis player will surpass the previously highest ranking

held by a Japanese male tennis player, which you may have guessed was No.46, held by Japanese male tennis player Shuzo Matsuoka. By losing today's final, Nishikori leapt thirteen places, landing on No.48. For all the pride he must feel at his entry into the top 50, you'd have to imagine those three spots above him loom large in his thoughts.

Meanwhile, over in Casablanca, Pablo Andujar also won his maiden title, over Potito Starace. Andujar at No.52 is the 10th highest ranked Spaniard in the world, meaning he won't even be picked to *wash* the oranges for the Davis Cup team. (He's ranked 13 spots above Lleyton Hewitt, around whom the entire Australian Davis Cup effort is based. Tennis Australia's self-defeating internal squabbles seem like time and energy well-spent). Anyhow, Andujar and Sweeting are the fourth and fifth players to claim a first title in 2011, and it's only April. Three players managed it in all of last year. None of these tournaments were exactly big deals, but that's precisely what weeks like this are for.

Monte Carlo Masters 1000

Play has commenced at the Monte Carlo Masters 1000, home to the prettiest centre court on tour. Sadly, no new player will be claiming this title, given that Rafael Nadal has won it every year since 1973, and will go on winning it until the sun explodes. He stepped off the plane to an audience with Prince Albert, whereupon they rehearsed their comedy routine for the trophy presentation, and wondered aloud why the other players even turn up. Djokovic and Soderling got the hint, and pulled out. Federer has lost to Nadal here about as much as he's lost to him everywhere else, but figures he's due a win: the sin of pride.

The sporadically diverting sideshow of who will get to be runner up is already under way. Results so far have been patchy. A newly shorn Ernests Gulbis saw off an ailing Alexandr Dolgoplov in short order, while Philip Kohlschreiber took his typical three sets to dispose of Andrei Golubev. Battered, he's earned an hour with Federer in the second round. Meanwhile, Milos Raonic and Michael Llodra fought out one of the weirdest matches of the year, which is adequately summed up by the scoreline: 6/3 0/6 6/0. The momentum shift at the set break is amongst the strangest phenomena in tennis, although in this case the shift actually occurred with Raonic

serving at 0-40 in the opening game of the third. You don't have to be Llodra to lose from this position, but it helps. Another game for Milos, apparently.

Bandchariots and Backstops

Monte Carlo Masters 1000, Second Round

Raonic d. Gulbis, 6/4 7/5

Can you envisage the chaos that results when bandwagons collide? What does a bandwagon even look like? As a metaphor for the slavish and temporary adoration some fans feel towards certain sportspeople or teams, 'bandwagon' falls short. All metaphors by definition must, but surely we can get closer. Perhaps it is more useful to think of them as band-chariots, and for the clashing thereof we need look no further than *Ben Hur*. Collisions remain messy, but chariots can at least be modified for combat, and the superior model - sturdier, faster and bristling with superior ordnance - generally prevails. By that reckoning, Ernests Gulbis is last year's model, and a shaky contraption he is; powerful in his way, but shoddily put together. Quality components count for little if the rivets holding them in place pop out when the track grows bumpy, and clay tracks can grow bumpy indeed. Milos Raonic, by contrast, is an imposing design, and compensates for a lack of manoeuvrability with a large cannon mounted up front. Less a chariot than an M1 Abrams tank. Here endeth the metaphor.

Ever since Fernando Verdasco's unlovely and oft-derided 'real tennis' snidery in Memphis, breath has been collectively baited to see how Raonic's exuberant first strike game would translate to the clay. So far, so good, although his four wins since then have come against a pair of Mexicans with rankings requiring scientific notation, and a couple of perennial flakes whom even science can't help. In the next round Raonic will face either David Ferrer or Feliciano Lopez, meaning he will face Ferrer. It's unlikely he'll go further, but if he does there's the prospect of a rematch with Verdasco. If the Spaniard loses again, expect real tennis to give way to *realpolitik*. Imagine Raonic taking the match with a first serve at Verdasco's head, and managing to hit a squishy part unprotected by his hairstyle. That'd be unreal.

Ljubicic d. Tsonga, 7/6 6/4

If it's confusing why a player with Richard Gasquet's attacking capabilities would lurk so far behind the baseline, seemingly intent on blunting his own weaponry, it is frankly baffling that Jo-Wilfried Tsonga chooses to do the same. Indeed, of the five French players inside the top 30, aside from the forward-hurtling Michael Llodra, it is the defensive Gilles Simon that stands furthest up on the baseline. Gael Monfils hardly needs mentioning, but Tsonga - at his strongest when closing at the net - is a mystery. Still, his volleys were rubbish today, so perhaps that explains it.

Ivan Ljubicic, for his part, impressed greatly, fighting back from a break down in each set with strong all-court play, including a lovely dozen-point tear late in the first, featuring typically effective serving and a few gorgeous backhand winners up the line. It was exactly the kind of tennis he should have brought to Indian Wells, and the fact that he didn't explains why he's now facing seeds so early. The French crowd clearly appreciated the effort, although they're conceivably just weary of seeing their talented compatriots loitering pointlessly near the backstop.

Humble Pie

Monte Carlo Masters 1000, Second Round

Robredo d. Verdasco, 6/4 6/3

Almagro d. M Gonzalez, 6/7 7/5 7/6

By losing today to Tommy Robredo - and the scoreboard does the flaccidity of the loss no justice - Fernando Verdasco has departed the top ten for the first time in a year, falling to No.13, his lowest ranking in two. Given the volume of points he must defend before Roland Garros, it's unlikely he'll be back soon. More immediately, the yearned-for rematch with Milos Raonic will also have to wait, although given Verdasco's form, he has potentially avoided the biggest serving of humble pie since Yevgeny Kafelnikov promised Lleyton Hewitt a 'tough lesson' in the 1999 Davis Cup semifinal, before going down in straight sets. I poke fun at Verdasco almost constantly, but only because vanity this extravagant invites contempt, and even the roughest barbs adhere readily to his haircut. It is also hard to escape the conclusion

that he has grown far too preoccupied with the life of a pro tennis player, forgetting that at its core lies the sport of tennis. Nevertheless, I generally enjoy his interviews, which can prove more thoughtful and circumspect than one might otherwise anticipate.

Those concerned that Verdasco's departure will leave a critical imbalance in the number of over-groomed Spaniards at the top of the men's game will find relief in the news that Nicolas Almagro on the very cusp of the premier ten. He's been thereabouts for a while, and today's result suggested the definitive push will not be easy. Verdasco's precipitous departure naturally created a vacuum at the top, augmenting the one created when Roddick fell, but Almagro will still have to earn it. Gonzales (Maximo) served for the match at 5/4 in the third, and moved to 40-0. Even the dullard commentator surmised that Almagro was in some trouble. Nonetheless, he somehow broke back. The final tiebreak was not without its hiccups, but terribly dramatic despite - or because of - the uneven quality.

My cherished belief is that Almagro is the best claycourter in the world until the better ones show up, and he got on board with that assessment by winning everything in South America until David Ferrer beat him in Acapulco. I also said that the trick will be to maintain his form in Europe, and to continue beating those he should. Today he did that, but he gave his supporters a scare. A 12-10 win in the deciding tiebreak is better than a loss, no question, but such wins can prove Pyrrhic on the road to Paris. They add up. As Almagro's ranking rises, the number of better dirtballers above him shrinks, and the matches he is expected to win grow tougher. He'll need his energy.

What About Me?

Monte Carlo Masters 1000, Quarterfinals

Melzer d. Federer, 6/4 6/4

It is a fine point whether losing to his close contemporary and closer buddy Jurgen Melzer will scar Roger Federer more deeply than losing to, say, Rafael Nadal, or even to a streaky youngster like Ernests Gulbis. After all, in all the long years Melzer

and Federer have been on tour - they have been friends even longer, since the juniors - Melzer had never won a set against him. This is of course a misleading stat: until Wimbledon last year they had yet to play, a vagary of the tour. How envious Melzer must have felt, looking forlornly on as Federer mauled all-comers through the middle part of the decade, plaintively wondering 'What about me?' In the last nine months, the Swiss has made up for lost time, inflicting three straight set defeats.

Today Melzer returned the favour, with a stunning display of flat hitting, deft volleying and clutch serving. Although the match was closer than the scoreline suggests - most of Melzer's service games seemed to feature a deuce or two - Federer was emphatically outplayed in all departments. This is probably the part of it that rankled most. Federer was naturally plauditory for his friend afterwards, though he has to be, given the rapacity of the media response if he even hesitates in his praise. Federer generally insists, if asked, that he moves on quickly from defeats, and for the most part I believe him. His life, after all, is pretty swell. But I suspect it was the comprehensiveness of today's loss that will stay with him. Melzer was better all over the court. Some random stats to fuel or refute the discourse of decline, depending on your bias: Federer was 0/7 on break points, although Melzer was especially Federer-esque at those moments. Without a comprehensive fact-check, I have a feeling this was the first time Federer has lost to a lefty other than Nadal since 2003. Stats like these inevitably litter the downward slope. Make of them what you will.

For Melzer, this win affirms his continuing rise through the rankings, which was obviously not the result of luck, although Verdasco and Roddick's collapses have aided his percolation upwards. The Austrian has now defeated Novak Djokovic, Nadal and Federer in the space of ten months (none of them on their preferred surface), which is precisely the kind of sporadic prowess one likes to see from the No.8 player in the world. He will play David Ferrer in the semifinal, and if he reproduces today's performance, another upset is entirely likely.

A Very Difficult Opponent

Monte Carlo Masters 1000, Semifinals

Nadal d. Murray, 6/4 2/6 6/1

Rafael Nadal has moved through to his seventh consecutive Monte Carlo final, a necessary step towards his inevitable seventh Monte Carlo title, but the real story today was Andy Murray. Given recent form, this result was downright gobsmacking. Winning would have been a figurative punch in the mouth, but as unrealistic expectations go, pushing Nadal in the semifinal already skirts the boundary of reason. Few expected Murray to navigate the first round, the only seed ever to fall to a bye. It has been that kind of season.

Try though I might, I cannot escape the conclusion that Murray's most fervent wish right now is to be the underdog, which is a polite way of saying he wants to be left the hell alone. The final at Melbourne Park mostly supports this contention - it was supposed to be close - though the onus of expectation had grown burdensome even in the rounds before, against David Ferrer and Alexandr Dolgoplov respectively. His abject efforts following Melbourne came against players it was assumed he should beat, and, in the cases of Young and Bogomolov Jnr, to beat senseless. However, come Monte Carlo no one expected much out of Murray anymore, other than continuing disappointment. How low, wondered flak-happy fans, can he go?

In playing Nadal so close today, and blitzing that second set, Murray has reminded us that it wasn't so long ago he was considered a realistic contender on clay. We can probably discount Nadal's assertion a few years back that the Scot was his biggest threat, since Nadal regards nearly every player who has ever hefted a racquet to be a very difficult opponent, from Rene Lacoste on. But even those basing their assessments in reality felt that Murray's game should translate well to the slow stuff, courtesy of his saintly patience and excellent movement. The big result has yet to materialise, but there's little shame in that, since Federer tends to claim those rare clay events that Nadal doesn't.

Murray's backhand is amongst the finest in tennis, as effective in its way as those of Novak Djokovic and David Nalbandian. Whereas theirs are technically silken,

Murray's is rough-woven canvas, basic and functional. It is hardly less effective, but it looks like anyone can do it, even though almost no one can. Like Federer's serve, the simplicity of the stroke disguises its immense variety, the way apparently identical swings yield profound variations in torque and pace, and how effortlessly he can change direction. Nadal regards it warily, and for once he isn't being disingenuous. Denied his strongest play, the Spaniard is compelled to prise the court apart with different tools. It is to his credit that he invariably works it out, and today, again, he did. Tomorrow he will undoubtedly claim his 19th Masters event. It's good to see him back on clay. But it's even better to see Murray back at all.

All Bets Are Off

Monte Carlo Masters 1000, Final

Nadal d. Ferrer, 6/4 7/5

I am proud to declare, without a trace of deceit, that I picked Rafael Nadal to win the Monte Carlo Masters. Impressive, I know, but quell your awe. Stay your adulation. Given that his chances of not winning were roughly the same as my chances of surviving a thermonuclear strike to the face, it hardly ranks as a classic act of prognostication. Still, so certain was I of Nadal's eventual triumph that I would have put money on it, had that been feasible. Sadly, the odds were so poor that even a \$10 wager on Nadal would have resulted in rugged men storming my home and beating up one of my dogs - presumably the one I like - just to teach me not to be a smart-arse. It was right there in the terms and conditions. Speaking of which, placing a bet on any clay tournament at the moment yields this delightful warning, displayed not in the fine print, but bolded front and centre: 'This market will be void if Rafael Nadal is a non runner'. In other words, without Nadal, all bets are off.

I can hardly imagine a more succinct summary of the current clay season, or indeed every clay court season for the last six years. Nadal right now defines the limits of the surface, and the easiest way to delineate events is between those he graces and those he doesn't, which rather tarnishes the so-called Golden Swing. Monte Carlo has demonstrated that form isn't even a factor. Nadal was frankly sub-par in the final,

and so cautious that his few flashes of aggression are easily recalled and quickly recounted, such as the forehand winner on the second last point. Yet he dispatched David Ferrer in straight sets. Indeed, Nadal dropped only one set all week, which became a story in itself, though he was in no danger of losing.

Nadal won't win Monte Carlo for ever, but he may do so long enough to see it brought low, or at least lower. For those lobbying to see the event demoted to 500 status, seeing the Spaniard claim it for the 73rd time is only further proof that it doesn't merit Masters 1000 status. For all that it doesn't make a great deal of sense, I can kind of see their point: the predictability of the outcome lends the whole affair a vaguely deflated vibe, draining excitement as surely as the prevailing country-club atmosphere. Even Robbie Koenig and Jason Goodall didn't bother to show up. Still, of all the arguments in favour of demoting Monte Carlo, this is about the weakest. A better argument is that no Grand Slam requires three Masters events in the lead-up, and that there really should be one on grass.

It is possible to be seduced into thinking something will last forever, merely because it feels like it already is. Viewed from within, the interminable looks just like the eternal. Nadal will obviously lose another match on clay at some point, although no one can quite say to whom. Talk of Novak Djokovic (who has never beaten Nadal on clay) has lately given way to Nadal's knees (which have). The world No.1 is in Barcelona this week, determined to revisit the exact schedule that so effectively derailed his 2009. Last year he skipped Barcelona, and won everything that mattered. The lesson seems clear enough, especially for his fans, whose howls of disapproval are set to lift the roof. Then again, they were the ones who predicted that a second set let-down against Murray indicated a sure win for Ferrer in the final. If they were so sure, they should have put money on it. The odds were excellent.

A Slow Week

The story of a slow week has been a fast court. For those not following this relative non-event, which has required all the media oxygen it can get, Spain has formally complained to the ITF over the USTA's choice of surface for their upcoming Davis

Cup quarterfinal. The issue boils down a rule whereby no tie can be held on a surface that hasn't been used either at a Grand Slam, or at three or more ATP level tournaments. If we boil it down further, to a bitter paste-like reduction, it's hard not to interpret this as (at best) quibbling for its own sake, or (more likely) a cynical ploy by the Spanish to limit just how lightning-slick the court will play. If it's just quibbling, they'd best tread cautiously, since in Andy Roddick they're up against a world class hair-splitter, boasting near-infinite stamina in the art of aimless carping.

The surface in question is a pre-fabricated hardcourt called Indoor Hard Premiere, manufactured by Premier Services in Baltimore. The US has used it in any number of home ties, and it is the surface that was used at the SAP Open in San Jose a couple of months ago, the event where Milos Raonic served his way to a maiden ATP title, and where Fernando Verdasco's sustained and profound slump commenced. It's a stretch to blame the surface for that particular outcome, and based on current form it's unlikely Verdasco will be picked for anything more strenuous than cheerleading, but nonetheless, it's not a court conducive to the 'real tennis' preferred by four out of five Spanish men.

The reality is that Indoor Hard Premiere is not radically unlike any other hardcourt surface, and appears to be identical to Latex-ite, also made in Baltimore, which is allowed by the ITF. Like other hardcourts, Indoor Hard Premiere can be calibrated for speed and bounce by altering the paint and sand quantities in the top layer. The only thing that might be remotely new to the Spanish players is the name of the product, but even that isn't likely, since it was used in the tie between the US and Spain in 2007 (which the Americans won). Certainly, Nadal's claims that the court is 'completely unknown' to him and his team mates is disingenuous.

Given that the surface has already seen such prevalent use, for the ITF to rule in Spain's favour would let the proverbial cat out of the can of worms. Not only that, but the Davis Cup final last December was played on RuKortHard, an indoor hardcourt manufactured by Concept 90, and which is only currently used by one ATP event (Zagreb). If Spain's current petition was to prove successful, can you imagine the whining the French might bring to bear?

A Waste of Time

As anticipated, and hoped for, the ITF has shown sense, and dismissed the Spanish Tennis Federation's (RFET) appeal regarding the surface for the upcoming Davis Cup tie with the United States. Common sense of course isn't, but in this case, for a wonder, it prevailed. The Davis Cup Committee's ruling stated that the proposed Indoor Hard Premiere surface is readily categorised as a generic acrylic hardcourt, and is thus used in over 30 ATP events and at both Grand Slams.

Given that it is so generic, it makes you wonder at RFET's continuing assertions that it is completely unknown to them. Here is Albert Costa *after* the ruling was handed down: 'What worries me most is not knowing exactly what the proposed court is. We must know what to expect. However, it is essential that the ITF takes it seriously and not allow irregularities.' If that's what worries him most, then he doesn't have much to worry about. Presumably a great many pundits are contacting him already, inquiring after jobs in an advisory capacity, eager to impart the top secret intelligence that the Austin tie will be conducted on a very fast, low-bouncing hardcourt. Given that even within the same segments of the season court speeds change markedly from week to week - think Tokyo to Shanghai - it is a conceit to imagine that players cannot adapt readily to small variations. Let's spell it out: the Americans will be serving really big, and returning their serves won't be easy. In Nadal-parlance, it will be almost impossible. The low-bounce will also be designed to negate Nadal's spin, and to protect Roddick's junky backhand as much as possible.

Regarding the speed, the Spanish are not to be denied the last word, even if that word is as petty as all the ones that preceded it. Here is Nadal, trying to teach the ITF to suck eggs:

'The most important and the main thing is to see the court and see how it is. The fastest [courts] I've played on are in Tokyo and Montreal. If the Austin court is faster than these, then you have grounds for complaint, because it is illegal. But I know that the ITF has equipment to measure speed the ball and not allow it to violate the limits. However, we all know that when we play away, they always put in the fastest courts they can.'

First of all, being faster than Montreal and Tokyo is not illegal, since while those courts are fast, neither is at the upper permissible limit. I might be wrong, but I suspect the Paris Masters was faster last year (although sadly not in the years preceding). In any case, the Davis Cup Committee ruling already stipulated that the surface must adhere to Rule 38 (b) ("Court Pace Rating (CPR)"), and that the speed of the court will be tested by the rather impressive-sounding ITF Science and Technical Department. It's hard to see Nadal's insistence as anything but gamesmanship. He might as well insist that the tie is umpired fairly. It must be presumed by all parties that it will be, and to make a point of it would be to imply it might not be. Coming from the world No.1, all it does is undermine the sport's governing body, a bad business.

This idiotic affair has largely run its course, although its leavings will inevitably soil the ether for a few more days. The upshot is that nothing has changed, and no one has emerged better for it; in every sense, a waste of time.

Those Bedroom Thighs

Barcelona, Semifinals

Nadal d. Dodig, 6/3 6/2

Ferrer d. Almagro, 6/3 6/4

Sadly, RFET's Davis Cup kerfuffle has dominated tennis headlines, and has thus easily claimed line honours as Bummer of the Week. Although somewhat overshadowed, there has actually been a reasonably meaty tournament going on in Barcelona: the Open Banc Sabadell. The reigning champion is Fernando Verdasco, although he isn't the defending champion, having thrown a hissy-fit at some perceived slight, and taken his balls home. It hardly mattered either way: Rafael Nadal turned up, and no one else will be winning.

The world No.1 is through to the final, having somehow emerged from his toughest match of the week, a routine 6/3 6/2 win over Ivan Dodig, who I'll come to shortly. The important point is that this was Nadal's 500th tour level victory, and that at 24

years and 10 months he is the second youngest man to achieve this milestone (Bjorn Borg achieved it at 23 years 7 months, which may never be topped). Reminded of it afterwards, Nadal was less than fascinated, noting with wry bemusement that he had been on the tour for nine years. His eyes have assumed the horizon-bound glaze of those whose business is with history, by whose perspective 500 wins is no more useful than 499, since so many players have gotten there already, including Roddick, Hewitt, and Federer. Unless he manages to surpass the latter's major haul - and doing so is not beyond reason - his path to even fleeting immortality is made of clay, and mostly Parisian. His immediate goal, of course, is Roland Garros. As for Barcelona, winning it is a minor step towards that, like, say, Pete Sampras winning the first round at Wimbledon. It has to be done, but you don't need to dwell on it.

For Ivan Dodig, however, it has been a bigger deal. Prior to this week he had barely won a tour-level match on clay, but he is a fighter, and has proved more than capable of battling through a wide-open quarter. His win over Milos Raonic was reasonably hard-fought, although the latter was not at his best. No one is quite certain what Raonic's best even looks like, but there's broad consensus that it involves lots of very big serves, and his numbers against Dodig were well down. A bigger test awaited Dodig in Feliciano Lopez, who of all the Spaniards is the least virtuosic on clay, although it is essential to keep this in perspective. He *is* still Spanish. He's also a smouldering dreamboat, which meant his encounter with the Croatian provided rich contrasts from both stylistic and visual perspectives. With his flowing locks, manly jaw and bedroom thighs, Lopez was sharply at odds with Dodig, who looks like an unmade bed. Nevertheless, Dodig fought his way through that, too, and has entered the top 50.

Speaking of entering top anything - and vain Spaniards with a surfeit of testosterone - as predicted Nicolas Almagro has made it to No.10, which was a cherished goal of his, and is a frankly stellar achievement for Spain's third best claycourter. Unfortunately he encountered the world's second best claycourter in the semifinal - David Ferrer - and went down in short order. Prior to that however, he'd pushed through some interesting matches, although the interest lay mainly with his opponents. If we accept for the moment that Almagro is a genuine top ten player -

and the evidence is overwhelming, consisting of a 10 next to his name on the ATP website - then one would have to concede that Nikolay Davydenko still has the ability to rank somewhere above that. Until he stepped up to serve for the first set, he was clearly a better tennis player than Almagro, even on the latter's preferred surface. The question of why Davydenko choked from then on is the real issue. Jason Goodall went on a bit about his having switched racquets, though the Dunlop was good enough to get him to 5/4, ripping the ball gorgeously from both sides. Someone else proffered the explanation that his issues are 'psychological'. This is almost certainly correct, and even more certainly useless. We might as well say the Titanic sank due to the ocean (when we really know it was Leonardo DiCaprio's fault).

Structural Reforms

Barcelona, Final

Nadal d. Ferrer, 6/2 6/4

There's not much to say about the Barcelona final that wasn't said about the Monte Carlo final. Rafael Nadal sliced David Ferrer to ribbons in both, although we might say that the Barcelona match was less painful, insofar as a fresh razor blade hurts less than a rusty one. Nadal played better, Ferrer played about the same, and the result was about the same: it felt uncannily like watching a replay, right down to knowing the result ahead of time. For those few who had predicted victory for Ferrer - poor fools lying groaningly prone in an emergency department somewhere - Nadal took only an hour and a half to set them straight. Dominance need not be dull, but, honestly, this is. So far it has been a clay court season only a true fan could love.

It has also reinforced my view that Monte Carlo could be safely demoted, and the entire clay swing shifted forward a week, with Barcelona and Monte Carlo running as concurrent 500 events. It would probably be the only way Nadal will stop winning both events, though with careful scheduling he would be the one to pull it off. In any case, that's not really the point. The point is that these few weeks feel decidedly lightweight, and that it would free up a week *after* Roland Garros for a grass court Masters in the lead up to Wimbledon. It's not going to happen, but I'd like it to.

On the topic of resounding structural changes to the tour, arguably the most controversial point to emerge from Barcelona this week has been Nadal revisiting the idea of a two-year ranking system, something that seems to have gone unmentioned since his No.1 ranking was last under serious threat, back in 2009. I am reminded of the tendency of opposition parties to militate for sweeping parliamentary reform, only for it to slip off the agenda once they gain office. In other words, it is self-interest, since a two year system of almost any variety makes it harder for lower players to rise through the ranks, and harder for the top players to fall. To take just one example, under a two year system, Milos Raonic would still be mired outside the top fifty. As it stands, the rankings often only bear a passing relationship to form or ability, and extending the system as Nadal suggests would only alienate them further.

His stated reason for bringing it up is that it would help alleviate wear-and-tear on player's bodies, though it's hard to see how that would happen. Those inclined to play a lot still would, merely with diminished returns, and the top players can afford to take longer and more frequent breaks as it is. Nadal himself only played for 22 weeks in 2010, while Federer in his years of utter dominance played between 15-17 tournaments each year. There are plenty of things awry with the system, but this isn't one of them, and Nadal certainly has the luxury of playing less.

Fated To Be

Munich, Second Round

Dimitrov d. Baghdatis, 3/6 7/6 6/2

It is now over twelve months since Marcos Baghdatis defeated Roger Federer after the latter held match points, thereby introducing a jagged Shostakovich-tinged tune that was fated to become a leitmotif of the Swiss master's year. Federer was to reprise this achievement three more times before 2010 became history, and this new-found capacity to wrench defeat from the jaws of victory has grown into a key theme in the essentially fugal discourse of his decline. For fans of Federer, especially the zealots, Baghdatis has a lot to answer for.

Well, what goes around comes around as they say - I'm pretty sure they say it in the Bible, somewhere near the back - and the pious entreaties of the Federer faithful have been answered. For the second time in as many tournaments, Baghdatis has fallen after holding match points. Last time it was in Monte Carlo, to Radek Stepanek, while today it came against Grigor Dimitrov, in Munich; the omega and alpha of both tour experience and facial structure. The depressing aspect, if you're Baghdatis, is that he was clearly the stronger player for the first couple of sets. Until 6-4 in the second set tiebreak, Dimitrov had hardly made a return. Given his inexperience, victory seemed unlikely, regardless of what the idiotic commentator thought. Nonetheless, the Bulgarian hit out with calm assurance on those two matchpoints, and it was the more credentialed Cypriot that conjured the errors. The first only missed by a few inches, but that's tennis: inches are what it is a game of. Dimitrov took the next three points, and the set, and Baghdatis checked out. That third set looked exactly like hard work, and he looked exactly like someone who doesn't go in for that sort of thing.

Much has been made of Baghdatis' fitness - remember that training video the ATP inflicted on us, showcasing the sit-up regime he submitted to in the off-season? - but I'm not convinced his body is what is holding him back. He was fit enough against Federer in Indian Wells last year, and against Rafael Nadal in Cincinnati. What was missing today was the belief that once the first batch of opportunities went begging, that creating another batch was worth the effort. Blowing matchpoints is a crying shame, but it's just one of those things, and something that besets everyone from time to time. His third set - and he was down 1/5 - was a far more serious matter, for it demonstrated a perfect willingness to lose. It's the kind of behaviour that will lose him fans, who are willing to put up with a lot, but not seeing their man give up.

No Quarters Given

Munich, Quarterfinals

Mayer d. Dimitrov, 7/6 3/6 6/4

Stepanek d. Kohlschreiber, 6/4 6/0

If Marcos Baghdatis' loss a few days ago was the kind that loses fans, then Grigor Dimitrov's today was the kind that wins them. Behind for much of the third set, the Bulgarian went down swinging. The temptation must have been strong to going down throwing haymakers, but he demonstrated maturity in maintaining the deft jabs, stern uppercuts and solid blows to the ribs that had kept Florian Mayer on his heels for the first two sets. Defeat is a tough thing to swallow, but maintaining your composure whilst it happens will conceivably lead to victories later on, when things break your way. For a young guy on the make, keeping your head is paramount. The chances will come.

As it stands, Dimitrov's game is sufficiently attractive that a respectable fan-base is only a big upset away. When in full flight, he resembles Roger Federer in full flight, which is not a coincidence. The technical debt is plain, and has been amply remarked upon. There will always those eager to swear eternal fealty to a beautiful game played beautifully, and it's a hard bias to begrudge. But a gorgeous groundstroke repertoire will only get you so far, as Philip Kohlschreiber later demonstrated in going down four and zilch to Radek Stepanek. His shots weren't landing in, but the authority with which they were struck was hard to dispute, and the backhand remained a delight even if it couldn't find the court. He is a lovely player who can't or won't win ugly, and the cult-like dimensions of his fan-base reflect it. They understand that their man isn't going to win a major, but the sporadic and commanding upsets over the Andy Roddicks or Novak Djokovics make it all worthwhile, since they're so uncompromising in their virtuosity. That's fine for Kohlschreiber, but it's fair to say Dimitrov's ambitions are higher. The way he lost today suggests they might be realistic.

Following the 2009 Wimbledon final, Roddick was at pains to remind everyone that Federer rarely receives adequate credit for toughing it out, and winning ugly when he needs to. It's not the standard word on the Swiss, despite being the correct one.

Even in the years of his dominance he scored most of his victories that way. (It is not unlike the irrepressible cliché that Rafael Nadal wins his matches deep in the final set tiebreaker through sheer will and brawn - the myth of the unstoppable warrior. But Nadal usually wins in straight sets.) By modelling his game so closely on Federer's, Dimitrov has inevitably tapped into the discourse of the genius at work, no matter that the discourse is misleading. Anyone truly modelling their game on Federer would do better to emulate his generally glossed-over fighting qualities. If you simply attempt to mimic, say, the 2006 Masters Cup final, you don't end up with Federer, you end up with Kohlschreiber. Even Federer at his peak rarely played like that for long, so it's a stretch to think his disciples can.

But enough of this: on to the match, which was excellent. Mayer's notoriety for having yet to claim a maiden title is second only to Janko Tipsarevic's, and by moving through to his third semifinal of the season, he has once again put himself in a position to rectify that. In contrast to his opponent, his is not an attractive game. It is an intriguing one, although the resemblance to Fabrice Santoro's is mostly overstated, and mostly limited to a tendency towards playfulness when you don't expect it. He didn't look especially playful today, especially not as the third set wore on, and a determined Dimitrov looked set to erase the German's lead. As a Dimitrov forehand pass flashed by and in, Mayer half-turned, hefted his racquet as though faking to smash it, and then actually smashed it, repeatedly and with precise and frightening efficiency. It was the first time I've ever seen Mayer erupt, and it recalled Fernando Gonzalez not only in its thoroughness, but in the immediate catharsis it brought. He went on to hold a tight game, and then to close out a tight match.

Weeks Like This

The biggest problem with weeks like this, in which three concurrent 250 tournaments have snuck in just as the clay season hits its stride in Madrid, is that for the most part the events are disposable. Understandably, players are unwilling to risk aggravating even a niggle with two Masters and a major in the next month. Consequently, weeks like this invariably witness a record number of withdrawals, retirements and

walkovers, mostly precautionary. So it has proven again today, with all three events seeing a finalist progress when their opponent pulled out.

Munich, Semifinals

Davydenko d. Stepanek, 6/4 4/0 ret.

Mayer d. Petzschner, 6/3 6/4

The sporadically-engaging late career of Nikolay Davydenko continues its surge and sputter from week to week. Last week he choked away a lead in Barcelona, and now he's into the final in Munich, courtesy of some vintage play and Radek Stepanek's vintage hamstring. The Russian will have a lot to gain - mostly money, but also some pride - but not as much as his opponent - Florian Mayer - who will be chasing that elusive maiden ATP title. Despite both Mayer and Petzschner hailing from Bayreuth, their semifinal wasn't especially Wagnerian, except insofar as it recalled Rossini's opinion that Wagner boasted wonderful moments, but awful quarters of an hour. The interesting bits were interesting, but they didn't come around very often. Still, Mayer will take it. He's through to his first final of the season, and his first since Stockholm last October, where he fell to Federer. I suspect he'll fancy his chances rather more tomorrow.

Belgrade, Semifinals

Djokovic d. Tipsarevic, W/O

Of the three events played this week, Belgrade has by a considerable margin been the least interesting, partially through being the worst attended, but mostly because Novak Djokovic is a shoe-in for the title. Djokovic's family of course owns the event, and so his attendance is virtually guaranteed, which is fortunate since his profile is the only thing elevating the tournament above, say, Johannesburg, or even the oft-derided Newport. However, as with Nadal elsewhere, inevitability merely deflates the vibe. Djokovic's spot in the final was so certain that the tournament might as well have re-instituted a 'challenge round', although it has kind of worked out that way on its own. Djokovic has so far faced Blaz Kavcic, ranked 85, and Adrian Ungur, ranked 175, and he is one match from the title. The other half of the draw was essentially a

conveyor belt leading to a meat grinder, upon which hapless lambs fought for the privilege of being minced. Feliciano Lopez is the lucky lamb.

Estoril, Semifinal

Verdasco d. Raonic, 6/4 ret.

The most eagerly anticipated match of the moment has not been Nadal and Djokovic on clay, nor even a new instalment of the Fedal tussle, but the first clay-court encounter between Milos Raonic and Fernando Verdasco. Ever since the Spaniard's ill-chosen words in Memphis - the infamous 'real tennis' barb - breath has been collectively baited to see how the Canadian would fare on the dirt. So far he's fared very well indeed: a respectable 9-2 record, counting Davis Cup.

Unfortunately, Estoril's schedule having been bugged by the weather, the last of those wins occurred only a few hours before his semifinal, a debilitating grind over Gilles Simon. Early in the first set against Verdasco, Raonic received treatment on his back, and subsequently called it a day before the second commenced. He wasn't exactly crippled, but he is due to face Lopez in Madrid in a couple of days. There's no good reason to kill yourself at a 250 event in Portugal, even with a niggle.

As for Verdasco, it counts as a win, but not as revenge.

A Confluence of Cock-Ups

Munich, Final

Davydenko d. Mayer, 6/3 3/6 6/1

Estoril, Final

Del Potro d. Verdasco, 6/2 6/2

There isn't a single good reason why Nikolay Davydenko and Juan Martin del Potro are closely linked in my mind, but there are any number of facile ones. It's strange how that happens. The connection began forming at the World Tour Finals in 2009, when both progressed to the final, proving themselves the only men up to beating Roger Federer at the O2 Arena, a distinction they still hold. The final itself was the

match that inspired del Potro's noteworthy comparison of Davydenko to a PlayStation set to hard mode, by which he probably just meant that the Russian ran everything down and got everything back. However, there really *is* a touch of video game-like hyperreality in Davydenko's capacity to take the ball so absurdly early, though one suspects that a tennis game in which players struck the ball like Davydenko at his best would be widely condemned for a lack of realism.

As I say, the connections between the two are not solid. Wrist injuries ensured a lousy 2010 for both, although Davydenko's appeared not to be as bad. Both are now back, although their returns have coincided in neither timing nor manner. Del Potro already looks inexorable, even as his fans maintain a softly-softly exuberance, and mutter hopefully of the US Summer to come. Davydenko is playing some of his very best tennis, but never for a whole set, and it invariably gives way to his very worst tennis, which can look pretty bad, indeed. Often he saves it for a winning position, but sometimes he rolls it out at the get-go, just for a lark.

Both men boast truly stellar records in finals. In winning Munich, Davydenko has moved to 21-6. Del Potro, the Estoril champion, is now 9-3. Their opponents today, by comparison, are predisposed to save their very worst for last. Florian Mayer fought sternly if nervously, but now stands at 0-4 in his career. At 27 there is still reason to believe he'll pick up a title somewhere, but the belief is fast becoming a quaint hope. Fernando Verdasco, on the other hand, is the proud owner of five titles, although that isn't an amazing return from fifteen finals. (Is it just me, or has Verdasco grown *swarthier* since returning to Europe. Otherwise he seems unchanged - the haircut remains impenetrably sculptural and his outfit still looks like a cruel dare - but following the match his face looked dark enough to match his mood, as he brooded over the confluence of cock-ups that had led him unswervingly to a bad day in Portugal.)

In winning titles today, both Davydenko and Del Potro have seen their rankings leap encouragingly, to the point where both will be seeded for the French Open, as they should be. Where they are seeded will depend largely on how they perform in Madrid and Rome, where they have no points to defend, every reason to be tired, and the capacity to wreck a marquee player's week.

Fiasco

Madrid Masters 1000, First and Second Rounds

It is a testament to the rankings trout-farm between 10 and, say, 30, that so few of today's ostensible upsets were surprising. The betting market was a shambles, matching the results. In hindsight we might pretend otherwise, but the fact is that the merely lucky cleaned up, and the astute were left for dead, a configuration beloved by bookies. Anyway, it's all in the past, and hindsight can be permitted its frolics. Five of Sunday's finalists returned to action, but only three of them won.

Speaking of frolicking, Feliciano Lopez apparently survived the meat-grinder of Belgrade more or less psychically intact, perhaps satisfied at having pushed the preordained victor to a tiebreak on sludge. Today he was too much for Milos Raonic, whose tiredness has progressed from his limbs to his brain, inspiring a baffling tactical adjustment following an excellent first set. Thereafter he retreated, inviting the attacking Lopez to step in, a bad move in fast conditions. What ensued wasn't quite real tennis, but it was enough to earn Lopez a date with Federer. It is debatable what consolation his close chum Fernando Verdasco will draw from this, although he certainly needs consoling. His psychic lacerations following a shellacking in Estoril are clearly profound, and saw him succumb in arguably the upset of the year, going down in straight sets to Yen-Hsun Lu. It was the latter's first tour victory on clay in about seven decades, or years, I forget which. To put this result in perspective, Lu's last match on clay was in the first round of qualifying in Belgrade, where he lost 6/0 6/4 to Ervin Eleskovic, ranked 441. It was not an upset. It's about time Verdasco lost the watermelon pink t-shirt, but only because I don't like it. He should probably do something about his tennis, too.

Hitching a temporary ride on the debacle wagon was David Ferrer, who traded bagels with Adrian Mannarino, and Juan Martin del Potro, who stuffed his hip, was told by the physio not to continue, and then continued to beat Mikhail Youzhny. How he'll pull up is the vexing issue, especially if you love or loathe Rafael Nadal, who he's due to face next. To the merely sane, it's merely interesting. The burbling of seeds tumbling like a brook over rocks continued steadily as Florian Mayer

overcome Viktor Troicki in an unlovely match, and as Gael Monfils, for a change, retired injured.

Nikolay Davydenko, fresh from titling in Munich - they gave him a car, don't you know - contrived to lose to Marcel Granollers, who at No.50 is the 65th ranked Spaniard, and whose technique is so awkward that he almost flies to pieces with each groundstroke. But you never quite know when the Russian's worst effort is coming these days, although you know it's never far away. Today he failed to earn a single break point. What a mess.

Just Because It All Looks Smooth

Madrid Masters 1000, Third Round

Federer d. Malisse, 6/4 6/3

Returning to the court less than a day after scraping through a life-shorteningly tense encounter with Feliciano Lopez, Roger Federer today saw off another talented near-contemporary in Xavier Malisse. Federer's last three matches have been against players aged 29 or 30, which, as we are reminded daily, is his age, too. In the wider world, we like to refer to this type of thing as a 'coincidence'. Within the more limited scope of tennis reportage, it apparently indicates a clear case of something or other, and therefore has to be exhaustively dissected.

Interviewed on court after the win, Federer was unusually expansive when invited to elaborate on why Malisse has never made it to the top level of the game. It is the kind of reasonable question that almost invariably elicits a guardedly bland response from a player, and so the comprehensiveness and honesty of Federer's answer caught everyone off guard. He happily conceded that Malisse boasts an array of excellent strokes - although he suggested the Belgian's second serve was a little 'predictable' - but then went on to add that despite this, Malisse generally falls short in his application. Malisse will hit some 'magical' shots, but the physicality and 'work-ethic' required to make oneself run down balls and grind it out from week-to-week is missing. In other words, Malisse is lazy. I have often wondered whether Federer

looks at Malisse and experiences a 'there but for the grace of God go I' moment. Now we know he doesn't.

Federer finished by suggesting that 'just because it all looks smooth doesn't always mean it all comes so easy, either'. Mere talent does not guarantee greatness, and it's worth considering the idea that Malisse has actually played to his abilities, or even exceeded them. It's a discussion worth having. I've noted several times before that onlookers tend to exalt talent over mere hard work. The expectations for the talented know few limits, though the capacity to feel betrayed when they do not meet those expectations is consequently vast.

Part of the problem is that Malisse and Federer entered fan-consciousness at around the same time, and were foremost in a coterie of touted next big things. Following the 2002 Wimbledon, the standard word was that Federer was merely a promising head case - he fell to a qualifier in the first round - while Malisse was the real deal, having progressed to the semifinals. Nine years later, however, and that Wimbledon semifinal remains the Belgian's best result in a major, and that Wimbledon is itself considered to be among the worst in living memory, not least because the last four included Malisse. His fans wait in vain for a Melzer-style late-career bloom, but it wasn't hard work that'd hitherto held Melzer back, and a work ethic is not something players suddenly discover at 30.

Federer didn't bother to point it out, but the corollary to these considerations is that *his* unmatched accomplishments owe less to talent, or even his oft-ascribed genius, than to his willingness to grind out matches when his game isn't flowing free. Naturally, those truly intimate with the sport know this, but it always bears repeating, along with Martina Navratilova's line that it doesn't matter how good you are when you play well, but how good you are when you play badly, or the line that you're only as good as your second serve. Clichés both, but particularly pertinent to Xavier Malisse.

Atmospherics

Madrid Masters 1000, Semifinals

Nadal d Federer, 5/7 6/1 6/3

Djokovic d Bellucci, 4/6 6/4 6/1

The word of the week has been 'altitude'. Apparently Madrid has lots of it, and no opportunity has been missed to point out the Spanish capital's majestic remoteness from sea level, as though the Caja Magica is the enchanted annexe of a Tibetan monastery. To be sure, 640 metres is *not* sea level, but it's also not so high that the laws of aerodynamics cease to be compulsory. Presumably there's still air. In a similar vein, much has been made of the fact that the roof was closed for last night's semifinals. The difference, it was intimated, is that it was now an *Indoors Match*, recalling those serve-centric blitzkriegs of the 1990s, the ones that were allegedly destined to kill tennis. On the other hand, scant attention was paid to the reason why the roof was closed in the first place, which was because it had been raining all day. The court was damp and played like treacle, even if the venue is apparently so stratospheric that there was hardly enough air to retard the ball's progress through it.

All of which is to say that it is a clay court, a fact that is obvious to the average punter but has proven harder to keep in mind for the avowed experts. Hacks sufficiently jaded that they usually take Nadal's humble pronouncements with a bowl of salt have allowed themselves to be temporarily sucked into believing the tripe:

"It's clay, Nadal is the clear favourite."

"Don't forget, the altitude . . ."

"Yeah right, the altitude. Nadal winning will be *almost impossible*."

So it goes. Anyway, assuming for the nonce that Madrid *is* actually played on clay, it came as no real surprise when Nadal and Djokovic - defenders *par excellence* - today set about confounding the trite theory that attack is the best form of defence. On clay, this has never held true: a sturdy defence will almost always prove impregnable for a comparable attack, or even a superior one. It isn't by accident that Roland Garros remained the glaring hole in Pete Sampras' curriculum vitae, though

really, the whole clay swing was a sore point for him, and no one in the 90s could cover a court like Nadal or Djokovic.

For fans of Federer, numbed by the relentless discourse of decline and fall, today's semifinal was hopefully heartening. If it had been played five years ago, between younger men, no eyes would have been batted. Indeed, it was pretty reminiscent of several bygone clay court encounters between these two, particularly some Monte Carlo finals. In other words, Federer didn't lose today because he's past it, he lost because Nadal is arguably the greatest claycourter who has ever lived. Relentless attack was always going to be a long shot, but it was better than no shot, and he was nowhere near as far from winning as the scoreline suggests. Many have suggested that Nadal didn't play his best, but it wasn't the kind of encounter whereby he could. His best is based around dictating patterns, and Federer was not allowing him to dictate much at all. This resulted in plenty of errors from both men, but also some truly wonderful shotmaking, again from both. Nadal was rightly proud to have progressed.

Pride is something that Djokovic has in abundance. I'm not convinced it's doing him much good, since it sometimes seems to choke his heart, causing him to beat his chest like a maniac, as though suffering a heart-attack, or a fit. I recall he has a history of breathing issues, and this might explain why: bruised bronchioles from over-pounding. He was at it again today when he finally overcame an initially inspired Thomaz Bellucci. Bellucci's faithful fans, those who've stuck with him through some lean times, will take much from this week. Mostly it will be good stuff - beating Murray and Berdych, and bossing Djokovic around for a set and a bit - but there will also be concern for his groin, which he strained. More concern than usual, that is. I last watched Bellucci play live in the first round of the Australian Open, where he overcame Ricardo Mello in five tough sets. Judging by his support that day, no few of those faithful fans have been patiently awaiting their chance to examine his groin in some detail.

'Red Hardcourt!'

Madrid Masters 1000, Final

Djokovic d. Nadal, 7/5 6/4

Novak Djokovic has beaten Rafael Nadal in the final of a Masters 1000 event for the third time in as many months, which doesn't make the task of writing about it any easier, especially if you're disinclined to repeat yourself. All things considered, the Madrid final was not radically unlike the finals of both Indian Wells and Miami. The dynamics that so enthralled pundits in those matches were in play once more, with the added spice of it occurring on clay, in Spain, and that the world No.1 looked even less like winning.

Indeed, it was another stark reminder that when Nadal loses on his beloved clay, it may be rare, but it's never very close. Think of Robin Soderling at Roland Garros, or Roger Federer in Hamburg. If you're a Nadal fan, such reminiscences are likely the last thing you feel like submitting to. (Perhaps a review of the 2008 French Open final, instead?) Anyway, there are more pressing concerns. Nadal's entire approach is predicated on breaking the other guy down: outlasting, outrunning and ultimately outlasting. So what can be done about the world No.2, who can stay with Nadal all day, and whose immaculate technique isn't breaking down? Predictably, there have been strident declarations as to the inauthenticity of the Madrid clay - 'red hardcourt!' they holler - and that normal service will be resumed in Rome and Paris. Djokovic, they insist, has yet to prove himself over five sets on the dirt. But the tone is desperate, and predicting what will happen based on Djokovic's history has become a frivolous task.

If Tomas Berdych defines the upper capabilities of tennis robotics as it currently stands, then Djokovic offers a glimpse of where this exciting science might be in twenty years. I don't mean to suggest that the Serb is robotic - far from it, though I *am* saying Berdych is - but merely that if you were to design a tennis player, you'd probably come up with something like him. The way he is playing right now, the closest thing he has to a weakness are strengths marginally less extravagant than others. His serve and forehand are merely world-class, and not to be compared to his backhand and movement, which are out of this world. I suppose his volleys are

less than stellar, but he's a hard man to lure forward on terms that don't suit him, since he moves as well into the court as he does laterally.

Perfection only remains interesting until you're sure it will last, at which point it becomes onerous. Djokovic is not at that point yet. Again, far from it. Even discounting the possibility that his erstwhile and lately-submerged fallibility will resurface without warning - and I *don't* discount it - there remains the matter of McEnroe's record to keep things interesting, not to mention the fact that he can claim the No.1 spot as early as next week. Djokovic is 32-0 for 2011, the second best start to a year in the Open Era. No doubt a loss is due, but having dismissed Nadal on clay, even his staunchest detractors are unwilling to say how, or when.

Roman Horror-day

Rome Masters 1000, Second Round

Soderling d. Verdasco, 2/6 7/5 6/4

Madrid and Rome won't be the only Masters 1000 events to run back-to-back this year, but as far I can tell they are the only ones that will actually overlap. First round toil got under way in Rome some time prior to the Madrid final's commencement. Back in the days when unseeded players made it to finals, this might have caused a problem, but they don't anymore, so it didn't. It does mean the Madrid finalists - Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic - have a pretty brisk turn around. If there wasn't the pressing matter of the top ranking, one or the other might have given it a miss. Encouragingly, Rome at a bare 20 metres above sea level falls within Nadal's operational parameters, meaning the world No.1 can be considered a reasonable shot at the title, unlike the exospheric Madrid, where - addled by oxygen debt - he was apparently lucky just to locate the venue each day.

Anyway, Rome is nearly two rounds old by now, and has generated no shortage of fascinating results, of which the most fascinating has been Fernando Verdasco's very sad loss to Robin Soderling today. Aficionados of choking will want this gem on their hard drives, so they can review it repeatedly, in slow motion, just to pinpoint the exact moment when the Spaniard's brain irrevocably scrambles. Of course, 6/2 5/4

40-0 isn't an utterly impregnable position - especially for Verdasco - but it's undeniably strong. From there a double fault and some tough play by Soderling brought it back to deuce, while a couple more double faults eventually saw the Swede break.

However, Soderling hardly ran away with the third set, although his determination not to take control was trumped at every turn by Verdasco's commitment to giving it away. Eventually they were on the same page, and Soderling's win was thus assured, but not before the lights malfunctioned, and a couple of medical timeouts. A bug flew into Verdasco's eye and set up camp - which was unusual - and at the end he refused to shake the umpire's hand, which has kind of become his signature move, like Radek Stepanek's 'Worm', or Petr Korda's scissor-kick.

Djokovic's is now a mind free from doubt, almost as though his capacity to second-guess himself was systematically extracted. It was then distilled, bottled, and then marketed as an exclusive hair product for men: *Doubt pour homme*. The recommended dosage produces no side effects, although too liberal an application can lead to acute mental paralysis. We begged Verdasco to lay off the stuff - literally begged him! - but he was having none of it. It's hard to argue with the results, though. He may not be able to serve out a tennis match, but he sure has great lift.

Important Points

Rome Masters 1000, Third Round

Two more contenders for Match of the Year emerged today, happy news for a season that has hitherto produced few classics. Initially, however, the prospects for even mild diversion looked grim.

Nadal d. Lopez, 6/4 6/2

We were off to a slow start when Rafael Nadal's appearance on centre court was delayed by illness, which meant that once play commenced, his opponent Feliciano Lopez had to work particularly hard to capitulate lamely. Never let it be said that he isn't down to the task, although a first set fightback nearly undid some initial bad

work. As ever it was the backhand that failed to save the day: when the chips are up, go with what you know. Momentarily abandoning the script, Lopez saved one match point with a superb crosscourt forehand, but thereafter he remembered himself, and pushed a deft slice wide to surrender the match a few minutes later.

Gasquet d. Federer, 4/6 7/6 7/6

The Italian Open remains one of the few meaningful gaps in Roger Federer's resume, along with the Paris Indoors and the Davis Cup. Twice he's progressed to the final, the first time going out in an upset (2003), the second in a soul-wrenching classic (2006). I'm pretty tired of hearing about Federer's age, but there is the sense that his shot at a Rome title is slipping away, not because he isn't good enough, but because realistic chances are so few. Taking the title this year is looking very unlikely, especially now that he has lost.

Some have suggested that Federer would have won today's match had it taken place a few years ago. As it happens, it did take place a few years ago - in Monte Carlo in 2005 - and he didn't win it. Gasquet did, in a third set tiebreaker. Federer did win their next eight encounters, however, suggesting he has a pretty good read on the Frenchman's game, including an awareness that when Gasquet is firing, he finds it difficult to miss the court, no matter where he aims or how hard he swings. There were patches of that today, even from the notoriously weaker forehand.

On a warm day on a slowish court, there were torrents of winners from both men, and only a meagre assortment of errors. It is hard to argue with Federer's vaguely arrogant assertion that it was he who lost the match. Gasquet's brilliance made it close, but Federer was brilliant, too, right up until the tiebreakers, when he wasn't. We might say that the Swiss played the important points poorly, though this begs the question of what the important points even are. Surely all the points Gasquet won to force those tiebreakers were pretty vital, especially from a break down in the second.

Soderling d. Almagro, 6/3 3/6 6/4

There are only a handful of claycourtiers in the world better than Nicolas Almagro, and today he played one of them very close in a very fine match. Sadly, for him, he still lost, which means his European clay season has so far turned out even more

disappointing than last year's. His South American adventures back in February had held out such promise, but promise counts for little unless you can deliver when the big boys turn up. The fact is, Europe is where it counts, and Roland Garros is where it counts most. I haven't checked his schedule, but I pray he hasn't gone the usual route of the second-tier dirtballer, and sacrificed a potentially deep run in Paris by chasing cash in Nice or Dusseldorf.

In its way, today's loss to Robin Soderling was better than Federer's to Gasquet earlier. There was - predictably - less variety, since neither of the protagonists boast anything like the latter pair's preternatural talents, but there was no shortage of clay court nous, and the jaw-dropping power of Soderling's forehand is worth the price of admission. It also boasted a tighter finish. It's worth finding a highlight of Almagro saving the first match point: a classic, and on an important point.

As for Soderling, today's was an altogether more accomplished performance than yesterday's against Fernando Verdasco, which isn't saying much. Next he faces Novak Djokovic, about whom we cannot say enough.

In Praise of Ephemera

Rome Masters 1000, Semifinal

Djokovic d. Murray, 6/1 3/6 7/6

Attempting to preserve ephemera via that most base and ephemeral of media - the internet - is doubtless a fool's endeavour, even with all the resources in the world. Of the hundreds of professional tennis matches played each season, there are less than a handful destined to endure in the collective memories of even devout fans, and even these few are almost exclusively drawn from several dozen matches between marquee players, and from the four majors or - occasionally - Davis Cup. There is little use in railing against it, since the collective memory has never been capacious, and if anything the prevailing mania for documenting *everything* has served to enlarge it. We can now download an early round match from, say, San Jose in 2001, whereas even professional results from the 1960s are irrecoverably lost.

Of the early contenders for Match of the Year, three have occurred in Rome this week. By any reasonable measure, the tournament must already be considered a success, and the final hasn't even been played yet. Furthermore, two of the classic matches of the last decade were Rome finals (2005 and 2006), with the latter being notorious for helping Tommy Robredo to his sole Masters title the following week in Hamburg, when both Federer and Nadal were too buggered to turn up. The ruling body were so incensed at this outcome that best-of-five finals were summarily outlawed. Anyway, Rome's reputation as the clay Masters *par excellence* has been well-earned, and the latest instalment has been one to remember. The problem is that unless the final is an epic, almost no one will remember it.

For several reasons, it is unlikely the final *will* be an epic. Firstly, Novak Djokovic already looked spent halfway through today's gripping encounter with Andy Murray. The second half of the match proved considerably more work than the first, so he'll surely have little left for Nadal. Secondly, the best-of-three format rarely produces epics, although Djokovic and Nadal have demonstrated that quantity trumps quality, so long as they hang around long enough. I speak of course of the Madrid 2009 semifinal, in which Nadal overcame Djokovic in about four and half hours. It is the longest best-of-three match in history, although that merely measures time on court, and not actual time hitting a tennis ball. It is not inconceivable that tomorrow's final will outlast Madrid, so long as they take a 45 second break between each point, instead of the usual 40.

As for today's match, which deserves to be remembered for a long time but sadly won't be, it was truly superb. It revealed nothing about Djokovic that we didn't already know, and little that wasn't explicit in a streak of 38 matches: he's the best player going around, he loves to thump his out-thrust chest, his parents are insufferable, and he's a hell of a nice guy. And Murray? It showed us that he can play well on clay. This week. Anyone who claims to know how he'll play next week or, more importantly, the week after, is foolish or wrong. He proved long ago that, when he's on, he can expose weaknesses in every opponent's game. That includes Djokovic, who today was stranded for a time in the Scot's psychic mire, and inexorably submerged. He was lucky to haul himself out with his very last gasp of breath. His overblown roars afterward suggested nothing so much as titanic relief.

Running On Vapour

Rome Masters 1000, Final

Djokovic d. Nadal, 6/4 6/4

Along with everyone else, I correctly predicted that today's Rome final would not be an epic, but again like everyone else, I was mistaken as to why. The widespread expectation was that a rested Rafael Nadal would run over a punch-drunk and success-soused Novak Djokovic. Djokovic had scrapped his way through a tough semifinal against Andy Murray, and Nadal hadn't. The day had been damp, the court was barely above sea-level, and Nadal had won every title in Rome since Mussolini's heyday, apart from 2008, when he'd lost a foot to a land-mine, or something.

Instead, we witnessed an aggressive and inspired Djokovic prevail in straight sets. The Serb was upfront about his approach afterwards, admitting that that an extended tussle was never going to work. Instead he arrived determined to hit out. On dreary clay, against Nadal, there was little chance that this would work, either. That it did work has nothing to do with luck, however, and everything to do with Djokovic, who is now operating at so stratospheric a level that he can actually *choose* how to beat the world's premier dirtballer on any given day, factoring in fatigue, prevailing atmospheric conditions and mood. They met only a week ago in the Madrid final, a zero-gravity environment, and Djokovic played a strikingly different match. Today he stepped in, and displayed little patience with mere neutral rallying. In Robbie Koenig's memorable phrase, he was 'vaporising' groundstrokes, apt for a guy running on fumes.

It has to be said that Nadal's approach also differed to last week's. He served with far more variation, and won 25% on second serve. He directed less traffic to Djokovic's backhand, so Djokovic opened the court with his forehand before vaporising backhands. Nadal's masterstroke, however, was to stop hitting his own backhand with any conviction, opting instead to loft off-pace junk onto the Serb's service line, whereupon it was summarily dealt with. I cannot imagine the conversation Nadal and Uncle Toni had in coming up with this 'strategy', but I can imagine their assessment afterwards. Nadal's stricken blank face at the handshake said it all.

It also declared plainly just how it feels for this proud champion to see his strongholds crumbling around him, even if the one that matters most still stands for now. It is the most keenly anticipated Roland Garros in half a decade. Whether Nadal's greatest fortress still stands in three weeks' time will determine the top ranking, and the year. In the end, these edifices are not built to last. Eventually, all that is solid melts into air. Or vapour.

Damned Lies

By and large, I have little time for statistics in sport, suspecting they were invented by Americans intent on ensuring the viewing public enjoys itself less. While stats at their best can prove illuminating when judiciously applied, at their worst they are worse than useless, crude or subtle distortions, yoked to dull agendas.

There is also the uneasy sense that for any sport to require so much explicative number-crunching, it must surely have something wrong with it. What is lacking, we might reasonably ask, that so many statistics are required to compensate? To foreign eyes, this seems especially so in American sports, which often seem little more than a framework over which endlessly permutating numbers may be draped to greatest advantage. Sadly, Australian sports are headed that way. Australian readers may know of Championship Data, who provide the thoroughgoing statistical analysis for the AFL and its various clubs. Champion's breakdowns of each game are so detailed that they provide a level of understanding surpassed only by actually watching the game, and for only ten times the effort. Larger, global markets surely have their conglomerated equivalents, perpetually threatening to overwhelm the viewer, and to divest the activity of any whimsy it may lay claim to. Ultimately, the best sports say most things on their own, if permitted to, and if played or watched.

Still, with all of that said, tennis is among the few mainstream sports that is underserved by statistics. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, a great deal of tennis statistics are either inherently useless, or so thoroughly deprived of context that they grow senseless. Think, for example, of the casual equivalence that has been established between winners and unforced errors, with the implication being that the

two are somehow aspects of the same thing. Forced errors, which we never hear about, and for which I'm no longer certain stats are even recorded, are generally far more revealing. The same goes for aces and double faults, which *aren't* equivalent, and mean very different things when down match point than they do at 15-15 in the middle of a set. Or about break points converted or saved, which may be revealing when viewed across very large data sets, but within the context of a single match tell you hardly anything, and certainly nothing that isn't more apparent from just watching the encounter unfold.

Secondly, statistics actually do serve a useful purpose quite apart from boring viewers to death, which is in measuring performance. In tennis - especially in singles - we have something called 'the score' to tell us that, and it generally lets you know who the superior player was on the day. However, in team sports performance measurement becomes far more complex, an inevitable result for any system involving a lot of moving parts. The performance of any single part is not necessarily reflected in the outcome of any given game. The score can only tell you so much, especially as results may take a while to reveal under-performance in a given player. With tennis, though, there's just a person with a racquet. To the even moderately practised eye, on court performance on any given day will pretty much speak for itself. The numbers are just padding.

Of course, it is in comparing that match to other matches that the real statistical interest lies, and where useful information resides. This is the area in which tennis has lagged behind, and is only gradually catching up. Perhaps surprisingly, it is the efforts of hobbyists and bloggers that are yielding some of the finest results - amateurs maintaining their own databases, sifting through mountains of results, and sometimes throwing up some really fascinating results (and, inevitably, a great deal of pretty boring shit, as well).

Flag Waving Maniacs

French Open, Day One

Following an inevitably slow week of stuttering build-up and sphincter-collapsingly dull press conferences, the Babolat Ultimate Tennis Experience got underway today, having usefully appended itself to the French Open. Although the press releases hinted at a relationship less parasitic, and more mutual, few are buying it, hopefully.

The top guns ensconced themselves early, and set about vigorously denouncing their own favouritism. The rest of the Tour rolled inexorably into Paris like the *Wehrmacht*, except, ironically, for the Germans, who chilled out in Dusseldorf, guaranteeing eternal glory and definitive weariness in capturing their fifth World Team Cup. Florian Mayer bagelled Juan Monaco on clay, proving he is worthy of his new ranking of 21. The engagingly flashy Philip Kohlschreiber swashed his buckles in going down to Juan Ignacio Chela in straights. His ranking of 42 feels about right. Little else of note occurred, apart from Robin Soderling turning up the week before he's due to mount a defence of his main point-haul. Ranked No.4 only a few months ago, there's a prevailing vibe that Soderling's ranking may be headed south, especially with David Ferrer eyeing off that No.5 spot, and being due to achieve something of note in Paris.

Speaking of Ferrer, he was one of a clutch of top players infesting the Cote d'Azur this week, along with Tomas Berdych and Nicolas Almagro. Almagro won the event in a tough three setter over an impressive Victor Hanesescu, a fun way to while away the day before your favourite major starts. I said he needed to prove himself on European clay, but Nice proves little, and won't benefit his ranking one bit; he maxed the 250 component back in February.

And so, inevitably, we came to Sunday, which is the first day of main draw action at Roland Garros, a scheduling miracle that even the organisers aren't quite sold on, given how few marquee players were deployed. Rafael Nadal called a late press conference, eager to share some last minute thoughts on the near certainty of Djokovic's triumph. Unless you're a tricolor-waving maniac, it was frankly a bummer line-up on the main courts. Fortunately, most of those in attendance were lustily waving the tricolor. Marc Gicquel got lucky when Lleyton Hewitt pulled out at the

eleventh hour, and then luckier still in getting to play on Lenglen. He was lucky enough against Albert Montanes, but sadly not good enough. Over on Chatrier, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga restored French pride in short order. Elsewhere, Mannarino went down, though Benneteau got through in four. Jarkko Nieminen turned up dressed as a member of the Australian Davis Cup squad, although his too-high ranking of 50 gave him away as an imposter.

Meanwhile in the outer, Ernest Gulbis succumbed to Blaz Kavcic, winning just seven games, and committing about eight unforced errors for each of them. He is renowned for not strictly giving his best, but today he actually looked engaged, and the result was about the same. Moving forward, the lesson is clear: why try? He has now lost 21 consecutive sets at Grand Slam level. Some kind of record. Earlier, Marin Cilic poured his soul into a straight set loss to Ramirez-Hidalgo, on paper an upset, on court a shame, and a bore.

By contrast to today, tomorrow's ticket to Chatrier is the hottest in town, with Djokovic and Federer back-to-back, the latter taking on Feliciano Lopez in what is potentially the match of the round. It'll be nice to see top players do something other than feign humility, in the only environment where even Nadal can't afford to. The journeymen, not permitted the luxury of endlessly spruiking their peers, continue to plug away.

Grassbound

French Open, Day Two

Berrer d. Raonic, 6/4 4/6 6/3 6/4

Darcis d. Llodra, 6/7 6/3 6/3 6/3

As a journeyman drawing a seed first up, you'd rather face Milos Raonic than Novak Djokovic, probably anywhere, but especially on clay at a major. If compelled to choose a *French* seed, you'd presumably pick Michael Llodra over, say, Gael Monfils. As it happened, neither Michael Berrer nor Steve Darcis were given much choice in the matter, but both took their chance, both in four sets.

Raonic ends his excellent clay adventure with more wins than losses, and certainly more wins than many had anticipated for him back in March. There is a prevailing expectation that he'll thrive on grass, but I'm not prepared to cede that point without reservation. Obviously his enormous serve will be an enormous asset, but serving isn't quite everything, especially on today's slower grass. For it to be the decisive factor, he will need to get his percentages up, notwithstanding the devastating curve and bite on his kicker. Returning and movement are pretty important too, and they aren't his strongest points. And all else being equal - which it isn't - the real key to grass is the capacity to hold your nerve, especially at the death of inevitable tight sets. But I digress: the second day of Roland Garros isn't the time to be thinking about grass.

Robert d. Berdych, 3/6 3/6 6/2 6/2 9/7

Sadly for Tomas Berdych, grass is exactly what he has to think about now, following a heartbreaking, come-from-ahead loss to Stephane Robert. He'll be spirited back to Ostrava, and there submit to reprogramming at the hands of his trusty Tengineers. Henceforth, he won't employ the slide so much, or the kick serve, which is a shame since he didn't use them to such ineffect today, which partly explains how Robert was able to tee off on nearly every second serve return and how just about any ball the Frenchman placed near a line was either an outright winner, or guaranteed that the next shot would be.

It would be misleading to lay the afternoon solely at Berdych's feet. Robert was fearless, which is the only way to be at two sets down, with hordes of compatriots hoarsely hollering. It's harder to remain fearless once parity is restored at two sets all, but he did. The compatriots were now flecked with frenzied froth, and Robert - who at 31 years old had claimed only one victory at Slam level - had every reason to tighten up. He didn't, even down match point. Breaking at 7/7 in the decider, the fans moved to a place beyond my powers of alliteration. He was even beyond his opponent's considerable reach, with the Czech later claiming resignedly he should have just gone for aces on every serve, first or second. He would have stood a better chance. Robert served out at 15, and Berdych, last year's semifinal, is grass-bound.

In other news: the current mania for monogramming has claimed another victim in Juan Martin del Potro. Feliciano Lopez found a way of saving break point that I've never seen before, despite eventually losing to Federer in three excellent sets. The Eurosport coverage is the usual miracle: a mostly relentless monologue from Mats Wilander, broken only by the ad breaks at the change of ends, at which juncture they often sneak in a promo for Wilander's round-up show: Game, Set and Mats.

An Awfully Nice Curse

Roland Garros, Day Three

(Q) Kubot d. (11) Almagro, 3/6 2/6 7/6 7/6 6/4

Of all the practical jokes recently inflicted on Nicolas Almagro, two in particular were humdingers, and it's a nice question which of them has proved funnier. Firstly, whoever convinced him to play (and win) a minor tournament on the Cote d'Azur the week before Roland Garros should feel tremendous pride in their skills of persuasion. It proved to be a sustained dereliction of common sense, especially given Richard Gasquet's example from just last year, which Almagro has now replicated: a title followed by a first round upset from two sets up. That said, the second gag was arguably better. Convincing Almagro that Roland Garros had moved to a best-of-three format attests to a Loki-calibre aptitude for mischief. The look on Almagro's face after breezing through those first two sets, only to realise he had to continue on . . . Well, that was spun gold.

Hopefully it is now obvious that the Open de Nice is cursed. This might seem like bad news for its organisers, but word was going to get out eventually, and there's no reason to think this will stop players turning up. After all, the only way protect oneself from such a curse is to not play the event, which requires a level of scheduling dexterity roughly analogous to dodging an on-rushing tortoise. So far only the best of the best have proved up to it. The other thing that should be clear is that Almagro cannot reliably showcase his abilities on any stage larger than a milk crate. For all that today's baffling loss resembled Gasquet's from 2010, it more immediately recalled Tomas Berdych's from yesterday, with the deft twist that Almagro was

mostly ahead even in the sets he lost. Admittedly, he didn't blow any match points, but he did blow a 3/0 lead in the fifth. He's also blown his European clay season, again. February 2012 looks a long way off.

(1) Nadal d. Isner, 6/4 6/7 6/7 6/2 6/4

Andre Agassi's fine autobiography *Open* can be appreciated on any number of levels, some more scandalous - and thus more vigorously publicised - than others. To my mind, the most engaging parts are the frequent match descriptions, since they give us Agassi at his most thoughtful, or in any case his least grandstanding. Particularly curious is the way he recounts five set encounters, employing a refreshing matter-of-factness, as though they are just like other tennis matches, the point being that once upon a time they were. Sometimes matches go to five, but the better player still wins, and it's no big deal. Prior to 2004, even the best players would lose sets and matches all over the place. Federer and Nadal have so recalibrated our expectations that even dropped sets are ponderously considered, each a portent of doom to come. Someone the other day was talking up Jurgen Melzer's chances at the French Open, given that he'd *almost* taken a set from Nadal last year.

However, there is such a thing as a sense of perspective, and ignoring it does no one any favours. Rafael Nadal was today taken to five sets by John Isner, yet he never really looked in serious peril. For all that the Spaniard's on-court celebrations were overblown, his measured press conference suggested little relief, and more irritation that he'd allowed himself to be detained on court so much longer than he'd wanted to. Call it arrogance, but I suspect that even at two sets to one down he didn't feel in enormous danger, especially once he'd broken to open the fourth. He could see perfectly well that Isner's legs had gone. Journeying further into Roland Garros 2011, the essential point to take from this match isn't that Nadal nearly lost, since he didn't, but that he expended much more energy than he should have. Sterner tests await.

Thud

French Open, Day Five

Six qualifiers have progressed to the third round of Roland Garros: Antonio Veic, Leonardo Mayer, Lukas Rosol, Steve Darcis, Alejandro Falla and Lukasz Kubot. I'd like to say this is the first time it has ever happened, but honestly I haven't checked. Six feels like a lot, though. Admittedly, if it's going to happen anywhere, it'll be on clay; if so inclined, a Challenger-level player might confine himself to dirt for much of the year, thereby honing some pretty specialised skills. So armed, he will occasionally inflict a bad day on peers whose higher ranking was primarily achieved on hardcourts or grass. Still, regardless of precedent or reason, six is a decent number, and rendered more striking by the fact that aside from those six, only four other non-seeds have progressed to the last 32.

(Q) Rosol d. (8) Melzer, 6/7 6/4 4/6 7/6 6/4

The upshot is that 22 of the initial 32 seeds remain, which as attrition goes is not excessive. Other Slams fare far worse. However, it is the calibre of the fallen seeds that has pushed brows up, and the ramifications thereof. The top ten is being reshuffled, almost hourly. Last year's semifinalists - Berdych and Melzer - are now both out, and both to qualifiers. The gravity of the 52-week ranking system is generally irresistible. A big result or two buys a year's buoyancy, but once that year has expired, you'd better be able to back it up, or you will return to earth in a hurry, with a thud. Melzer is in free fall. Berdych still has a Wimbledon final to defend before he too produces a sizeable crater.

(5) Soderling d. (Q) Ramos, 6/3 6/4 6/4

This is partly why Robin Soderling ranks among the more intriguing cases in men's tennis. Propelled by his efforts at the 2009 French Open - did you know he beat *Nadal*? - his ascent was swift, and by capitalising on some good fortune at the World Tour Finals that year he rose even higher. However, two years on, and the cheerful Swede continues to blow raspberries at precedent and gravity. His two preferred things are clearly 'indoors' and 'Paris', and he combined them to great advantage in winning the Paris Indoors last year. His portfolio of points is now sufficiently diverse that a failure to defend his final here at Roland Garros this year would be a serious

blow, but not a mortal one. Those are thoughts for later, however, since Soderling is still in the draw, although he has so far only faced a lucky loser and a qualifier, with another qualifier next up. He will doubtless reach the fourth round without facing anyone in the top hundred. It's better to be lucky than good, I suppose, although it's ideal to be both. Speaking of Nadal . . .

(1) Nadal d. Andujar, 7/5 6/3 7/6

So far the defending champion has looked unusually vulnerable, although the more fervent zealots have suggested that this is when he is at his most dangerous. This is not only counter-intuitive, but wrong. He is always dangerous, but he is at his *most* dangerous when he *looks* dangerous. Of course, Nadal dropped a couple of sets to Isner, but he rightly rued the squandered energy more than the score. Today he was back to squandering: he won in straight sets over his compatriot Andujar, but again looked terribly unconvincing and spent far too long doing it, having to rally from 1/5 in a third set that lasted 93 minutes, which is nine minutes longer than Federer's entire match took yesterday. The French Open is only two rounds old, and Nadal has already spent well over seven hours on court.

Fortunately, Nadal is close to Albert Costa, who fair bristles with useful advice. As defending champion in 2003, Costa played approximately 22 five setters on his way to the semifinals, and spent almost 7 weeks on court, although my recollections may be hazy. Nadal is drawn to meet Soderling in the quarterfinals, where he will be as exhausted as Soderling is ill-prepared.

Epic

French Open, Day Six

(13) Gasquet d. (23) Bellucci, 6/2 6/3 3/6 6/3

The stylistic clichés that define tennis coverage are legion, and cover the entire spectrum of suck, from bowel-wrenching cringeworthiness to the extravagantly pointless. Examples of the former include those horrible chats with players directly before they step on court, or Barbara Schett interviewing *anybody*. An example of

the latter would be Spidercam, which subsists almost entirely on the belief that everything appears more thrilling when the camera is moving. Fortunately, no one has cottoned on that the action is even more intense when the camera is handheld. Think of *The Bourne Supremacy*, and now imagine the Wimbledon final as directed by Paul Greengrass. Praise be for small mercies.

The technology for cable-suspended camera systems has been around since the 1980s, although it took almost 20 years to gain currency with broadcasters, who arrived only gradually at the realisation that many sports are too visually dull to engage viewers without adequate technical gimmicks. By the early part of last decade, Skycam was seeing use at a number of NFL and NCAA fixtures. It was roughly concurrent to this that the concept made the digitised crossover to motion pictures. Recall the Battle of Dagorlad in the prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, where it perfectly complimented the sweep of a vast battle, or in *Troy*, where it helped make some very boring sequences more confusing. That swooping panoramic shot is now standard for any battle sequences in any film, a visual shorthand for 'epic', which once upon a time meant something other than endless combatants - real or virtual - or the supplementary biceps on Brad Pitt's jaw.

The irony is that, despite those Skycam-type shots being borrowed from sports coverage in order to lend movie sequences a heightened dynamism, sports have since re-appropriated the technology in order to invest events with an epic quality.

However, tennis coverage has to be more than just epic. Unlike *Troy*, it has to make sense. Viewers really need to be able to follow what's going on, and as the athletes are moving quite a lot during the course of play, this makes a stationary viewpoint strictly necessary. In any case, Spidercam cannot be deployed during points, since anything larger than a stray gnat cripples a player's concentration. Consequently, Spidercam's task is almost entirely limited to swooping down onto the court while a player collects balls, or in the 78 seconds between Djokovic beginning his service preparation and the point actually commencing. Epic it is not, but still they try.

Thus did I muse today as the camera swung in low and fast over the heads of a thousand screeching Parisians, wheeling lazily over the scruffy, slope-shouldered, red-clad hobo gathering balls at one end of the court. Match point had finally arrived,

courtesy of a screaming forehand winner. He served, and match point was won, and Richard Gasquet was on his back, another sure clue that the match had been truly epic. The crowd were losing it, and Tomaz Bellucci, with his unruffled tan and vast sensitive eyes, was striding towards the net. The scene vaguely recalled Federer's 2009 Roland Garros triumph, in degree of exultation if not in detail, the key differences being that this was a third round match, and although it had been closer than the scoreline indicated, it hadn't been much closer. It boasted all the furnishings of an epic, except where it mattered.

Nevertheless, it is the first time Gasquet has progressed to the last 16 at his home Slam, which explains why he hit the dirt so suddenly. Whether he goes any further is a dicey question. Next up as faces the winner of Novak Djokovic and Juan Martin del Potro, a third rounder for the ages. Locked at a set each, play was suspended until tomorrow. Expect an epic.

The Fog Lifts

Roland Garros, Day Eight

Fognini d. Montanes, 4/6 6/4 3/6 6/3 11/9

The opinion has been aired that the finale to today's astonishing fourth round encounter between Albert Montanes and Fabio Fognini could not be scripted if you tried. This is incorrect. It honestly wouldn't be that hard to come up with something like this, assuming the writer has a knack for absurdity, and a willingness to sustain it. The real issue is that any movie produced from such a script would be laughed out of theatres as being too far-fetched, and this is from audiences willing to countenance midi-chlorians, or Gwyneth Paltrow as a sex symbol. Even *Wimbledon* did not go so far.

That said, if ever Richard Curtis gets around to making *Roland Garros, Actually*, he could do worse than cast Fognini in the lead. First of all, he has the looks, and is now the only bona fide dreamboat remaining in the draw (apart from Ivan Ljubicic). Secondly, the man knows drama, and indeed the casual tennis fan might know him for little else. Recall his match against Gael Monfils here last year, or his final against

Tommy Robredo in Buenos Aires back in February, which ended with the Spaniard refusing to shake hands, and Fognini screaming '*Pedazo de Mierda!*' at him.

Today's encounter began tamely enough, with Montanes eking out a tight first set, and Fognini roaring back in the second. They traded the next couple, but when the Spaniard moved ahead in the fifth, it looked like superior clay court pedigree would carry the day. The fifth set, so the saying goes, is all about nerves, which Montanes set about demonstrating as he stepped up to serve for the match at 5/3. From there on it was *only* nerves, until it was all Fognini. Four hours in, and the match got interesting. Even the French crowd - whose disloyalties were until this point evenly split - felt compelled to sit up and take notice.

Fognini broke back, and now it was Montanes clinging desperately on. A few games of this ramped up the tension up nicely, although Fognini - dramatically speaking - was just getting started. Serving at 6/7, he apparently wrenched his left quad, and stood very still at the baseline for a very long time, whereupon the umpire ambled over and duly permitted an impromptu time out. The fans, roused from slumber and now to ire, made their displeasure plain, and the match referee strode on to court soon after, demanding to know why a player was receiving a mid-game time out for cramp, which is a no-no. Fognini played it cool, and the medic played it coy. Neither would admit to cramp, Fognini shrugging away the ref's queries in a winsomely Gallic fashion, which failed to get the crowd back on side. He returned to court, but he could no longer move properly. Somehow he served out that game.

Even more astonishingly, Montanes was unable to exploit his opponent's compromised mobility. If the Italian had to venture more than five steps he didn't bother, but swung lustily and effectively at anything straying within reach, which, bafflingly, was just about everything. 'Never a backward step' is an admirable credo, but there are limits. After a half-dozen foot-faults, we could surmise that Fognini had more or less conceded the impossibility of victory. He steadfastly refused to take a step backwards, though Montanes proved equally intractable in not drop-shotting and junk-balling his way to a legitimate and inevitable win.

Still, despite his best efforts the Spaniard earned five match points, which vanished in a fog of winners and net-cords. Then at 9/9, Fognini broke. He couldn't move, but

he didn't have to. Montanes just could not hit the ball away from him. The Italian moved to 40-0. A stinging return erased one. A twelfth fault-fault did for the next. Then Fognini won, with a deft backhand drive up the line. The result merited a stunned silence, but the crowd was roaring and hissing and clapping and snarling and booing, as French crowds do. Fognini's camp went bananas, though the man himself looked merely bemused as he limped towards Montanes' impatient handshake. Fognini is through to his first major quarterfinal. This is where the adventure ends, even if he can take the court. He faces Novak Djokovic, who has no qualms hitting the ball away from anyone, no matter how mobile.

Still, thank God for this match, since otherwise today's pickings were slim. As they did in Indian Wells and Melbourne, Federer and Djokovic have collision-course scrawled all over them. Both played immaculately today, but it's hard to find much new to say about Federer straight-setting Stan Wawrinka, or Djokovic straight-setting anyone.

Vexing Questions

I ended the week vexed by two questions, the first newly-minted and the second near-eternal:

1. What is wrong with Rafael Nadal?
2. Is Liszt's E-flat Piano Concerto more painful than a root canal?

Pleasantly, or unpleasantly, the latter question has at last been answered to my satisfaction. The Liszt is far, far worse.

It turns out avoiding the dentist for nearly 30 years is pretty bad for your teeth, but I'd really needed a dentist to tell me that, so how was I to know? Bit of a Catch-22, really, and I certainly wasn't going to toddle along for a check-up on the mere say-so of any armchair experts. These included my wife, who had nonetheless displayed saintly forbearance as I sobbed quietly into my pillow each night. After only a few months of this, I discovered that pain in sufficient quantities mounts a compelling

argument. My resistance wore away as steadily as the back end of my molar, and so I relented.

Apparently it was a pretty bad scene in my mouth, although I told the dentist I already felt contrite as hell, so he let me take the spirited and inevitable lecture as read. I felt like I'd kind of dodged a bullet on that one, but the Lord works in nebulous ways. God's plan for my come-uppance was truly labyrinthine, and long-range even by his standards, and began with inspiring a young Franz Liszt in 1830 to begin work on one of the lousiest pieces of music in history, and ended by making someone program it to air on the radio just as I was being jabbed repeatedly with a whopping needle. I let out a low groan, inspiring some concern that the local anaesthetic had failed. Really, only a general anaesthetic could have saved me, but it wasn't to be, no matter how I begged.

I have now endured a root canal and the Liszt simultaneously, and lived to tell of it. I didn't feel great, and no one was certain if the drool was due to half my face being paralysed, or to being sonically lobotomised by the vacuous idiocy wafting from the radio. I'm due for round two in a week. Liszt's Second Concerto is a better work, but I'm taking some Rachmaninov along just in case.

For the record, I have no idea what is wrong with Nadal. No one does, and all the theories sound weak.

Yet Again . . .

The semifinalists for Roland Garros 2011 have been decided, and for a wonder the Big Four constitute the final four. The lazy inclination is to add a knowing 'yet again', but in fact it only seems that way. It occurs far less often than you might think. The last time it happened at a Slam was the first time it happened at all, at the US Open in 2008, the moment when Andy Murray joined this elite coterie. It also happened at the World Tour Finals last November. Incidentally, the configuration - Murray v. Nadal, and Djokovic v. Federer - has been the same in each case. One for the conspiracy theorists.

What happens far more regularly is that three of the four make it through, with one falling en route. In 2011 this has been the case at every significant event at which all of them have turned up, totalling one major and four Masters events. As consistent domination by the elite goes, it is unprecedented, and topped only by the fact that Djokovic won all of those tournaments, which cannot be topped at all. It also means that the dozens of remaining players are invariably fighting over a sole semifinal berth, or must be content with a quarterfinal finish. Of course, if they're in Djokovic's quarter, they can abandon all hope from the outset.

Returning to Paris, and the journey to the semifinals proved considerably riskier for the draw's bottom half than the top. Between them, Djokovic and Federer have faced five other seeds, while Nadal and Murray have faced only two. Federer alone has seen off Lopez, Tipsarevic, Wawrinka, and Monfils, which is a tough sequence on clay, though losing to any of them over best-of-five would have inspired headlines, probably, somewhere. Federer remains the only player to have not dropped a set, and hasn't looked this imposing since London last November.

Speaking of London last November: that was the last time Djokovic lost a tennis match, and he lost it to Federer. Ominous, no? No. Things change. That's what things do. That's their thing. Djokovic saw off del Potro in the third round, which immediately qualified it as a tough draw, though honestly it seemed tougher on del Potro. The quarterfinal walkover ensures Djokovic is amply rested. Those commentators concerned that a five day break will lead to radical deskilling should display a little more faith. He's still the guy that straight-setted Nadal twice on clay in as many weeks, and he's probably been practicing. The odds on a Federer win were about \$3.50 yesterday, which is about as low as I can recall for him in a Slam semifinal.

Meanwhile, Murray's draw has been about as taxing as a sustained fracas with down-stuffed pillows, although to be fair the pillows were being wielded by large hairy men, and he has a dodgy ankle. Thus hobbled, the Scot has rethought his fundamental approach to the sport. Firstly, he is now beginning matches extraordinarily slowly, to the point of gifting a few breaks from the outset, apparently so as to spend even more time on court. As strategies go it's not amazing, though it's still more solid than whatever tactical masterstroke saw him go down to Donald

Young and Alex Bogomolov. Once Murray feels the ropes kissing his backside, he commences throwing haymakers. Through five rounds, he has hit more winners than anyone else, both as a total, and in proportion to games played. Whilst neither Djokovic nor Nadal are ultra-aggressive players, Federer is, so this is saying something. Murray is usually a world-class noodler, but expect him to continue hitting out against Nadal in their semifinal.

Meanwhile, talk of an ailing and declining Nadal has proved premature. It turns out there was nothing wrong with him that couldn't be cured by seeing Robin Soderling over the net. If nothing else, it refocused the Spaniard on his true purpose, which is not to go on winning French Opens - he feels no 'obligation', apparently - but to continue putting the Swede in his place. Soderling, apparently, felt 'obligated' to submit to it. He played poorly. Instructive parallels might be drawn with last year's Wimbledon, where Nadal navigated a tricky first week, but lifted considerably upon meeting Soderling in the last eight, before seeing off Murray in the semifinals. The key difference is that this time, there will be no Tomas Berdych in the final.

He Is The Man, No?

French Open, Semifinal

(3) Federer d. (2) Djokovic, 7/6 6/3 3/6 7/6

In the end - for the players, the crowd, and at least one fan on the far side of the world - it was all about light. As Paris hurdled 9pm, and the fourth set surged to its wrenching climax in today's semifinal between Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic, word filtered down that the necessary decision had ossified into the official one. If Djokovic forced the match to a fifth set, play would be suspended. It was bound to be an unpopular announcement, and a French crowd that had actually *booed the net* was unlikely to display equanimity. They had rioted once already this week, over nothing more serious than a venue-shift (whereas the Australian Open's riots invariably arrive courtesy of senseless Balkan antagonism).

When Djokovic finally broke in a monumental, manicure-ruining game for a 5/4 lead in the fourth set, the writing was on the wall, and it said 'To Be Continued', like the

weekly serial in which a new plot element is introduced five minutes from the end. Two and two were put together, and the answer was tomorrow. No one was happy about it, though, excepting perhaps Djokovic. The stadium announcer was moved to a remote, secure, and secret location, hopefully delaying the delirious crowd from visiting grievous harm on him.

One could partly see their point, given they had so far witnessed the most electrifying and brilliant tennis match of the year. It demanded a better finish than a one-set shoot out in the brash light of Saturday. Federer's record at the Slam level when leading two sets to love is 174-0, and *no one* has won from two sets down in a French Open semifinal in the entire Open Era. Tasty stats, and nourishing for Federer's confidence, but they would seem like empty calories if Djokovic took the fourth, and was permitted to sleep on it. A one-set tussle is far more manageable than winning three in a row.

But Federer was having none of it. Three scintillating points, including a rocketed backhand winner up the line, earned him three points to break back, and he took one with a ferocious inside-in forehand. Back on serve, and the crowd erupted. The Serb fought on grimly, his face stricken, his body elastic. Both men were everywhere, and Federer's first serve was again untouchable. As Paris neared nine-thirty in dying light, we attained the tiebreak. Federer moved ahead early, even as Djokovic fought back. Then at 3-3 an error and two big serves brought Federer to triple match point, which is one more than he'd blown against Djokovic back in New York. Fittingly, the first two vanished with a dead net cord and an ace. The third was on Federer's serve. One more big one would do it. As the serve kissed the centre T at somewhere over 200 km/h, Djokovic's head dipped, Federer raised a single finger, admonishing a doubting world, and crowd was lost to delirium.

Here in Melbourne, pre-dawn light sluiced over the city like old dishwater. Once more, exhaustion and elation had fused in that cold grey wash of light. Addled from sleep-debt, I was transported back four years to the Hamburg Masters final, as Federer ended yet another titanic streak, and to Nadal's gracious words at the trophy presentation: 'If I have to lose against someone, he is the man, no?' Before today, he was the last man to defeat Djokovic, all the way back in November, and now he is the only man to do it in 2011.

For Djokovic, he of course falls agonisingly short of any number of accolades: the greatest start to a season, the No.1 ranking, a first French Open title. The first is essentially meaningless, and John McEnroe has already conceded that Djokovic's run is categorically superior to his own in 1984. As they embraced at the net afterwards, Federer told Djokovic that 'the streak speaks for itself', and it truly does. As for the No.1 ranking, it is undoubtedly not far off. Indeed, if Federer takes out Nadal in the final on Sunday, Djokovic will still rise to the top spot.

However, in order for that to happen, Federer must achieve the apparently impossible, and defeat Nadal at the French Open, a feat that has been achieved precisely once. Usually when one man has done the impossible, that man is Federer, but not this time. The great Swiss has never even taken Nadal to five sets here, and the last time they met on this court he didn't even take him to five games. Today he beat the best player in the world, and on Sunday he must beat the world No.1 and most terrifyingly complete clay-courter of the era. As assignments go, it hardly gets tougher, but if anyone can do it, well, he is the man, no?

Dominance Blooming

French Open, Final

(1) Nadal d. (3) Federer, 7/5 7/6 5/7 6/1

It was not until 5/1 in the fourth set, with the return of the sun and a second break in hand, that the dour knot marring Rafael Nadal's brow began to unravel, leaving only a furrowed focus. Twenty-four previous encounters had drummed home a stern lesson: a single break against Roger Federer is no guarantee of anything. The lesson was now quite fresh, having been meted out just a set earlier.

Nadal had appeared harried since the very beginning, even as the indefatigable fatuity of the pre-match interview was inflicted on him. Dropped sets to Isner ghosted his gaze, and pale efforts against Andujar and Ljubicic. Hard losses in Madrid and Rome rode his shoulders, and there, like a millstone suspended from a collar made of albatrosses, was Federer's imperious triumph over Djokovic just two days prior.

The world No.1 looked beset, and as play began he was beset, by the sport's greatest player in scathing touch.

In form if not in timbre, the 2011 Roland Garros final recalled several of this pair's previous tussles at the same venue (discounting the unrepeatable mauling of 2008). The arcs were familiar: Nadal's doggedness blooming into dominance, and Federer's brilliance growing clouded by a flailing impotence. Today's final was like that, too, but it felt somehow larger. Partly it was because this encounter was not inevitable, where the others had been, but it was also the match itself. Nadal toiled harder to figure out this win, and if Federer's brilliance was shorter lived, it kept coming back, in waves, until suddenly it was gone.

Naturally, a scoreline of 7/5 7/6 5/7 suggests a match that might have veered either way, and both men afterwards conceded as much. The first set was two inches from another outcome, and the rain's sudden intervention almost cost Nadal the second. Federer, by the Spaniard's admission, grew unplayable in the third, and by the time the fourth rolled in, they were virtually equal on points. But then Nadal held from 0-40 to open that set, and cosy hindsight tells us it was thereafter going only one way. At the time, though, with events unfolding in the miraculous high-resolution real-time of life, inevitability was harder to make out, especially as Federer shrugged away disappointment and held easily. The momentum still seemed to be his.

But then it wasn't. The margins on a tennis court are vanishingly small, but suddenly vanished entirely. Nadal had lifted from nowhere, and began to marry creative counter-attack to desperate defence. How many lunging stabbed lobs landed within a foot of the baseline, utterly blunting his opponent's netward forays? Looping crosscourt retrievals were transfigured into vicious drives up the line, and it ceased to be a dull question of how long Federer could sustain the attack before he missed, but a desperate issue of how long he could keep the world No.1 at bay. Not long.

Afterwards Federer aired his usual opinion – genuinely held, and hard to refute even as we query its putative arrogance – that these matches are more or less on his racquet. He said the same thing after losing to Djokovic at the US Open, and was just as right in saying it. If all his shots go in, he wins. But there's a good reason why so many of his shots don't go in against Nadal on clay, and today it had little to do

with the amply-hyped looping forehand to the one-handed backhand ploy - which Federer actually dealt with very well - but everything to do with Nadal's incomparable tenacity. Federer fought harder than he ever has, but Nadal fought harder still. In the end, the match ended like so many of theirs do, with a driven forehand error as elegant as all the winners, but more succinct than any concession speech.

I was immediately reminded of the 2009 Australian Open, or even 2008 Wimbledon, though this time Nadal only dropped to his knees, and rebounded quickly. He has tied Bjorn Borg with six French Open titles. As far as I am concerned, he is now the greatest clay courter ever to have graced the court.

Visions Fugitives

The Tour has released Paris to its Gallic follies, and rolled inexorably onward to verdant pastures, both Anglo and Teutonic. Queens and Halle are already a few days old, the grass is deep and slick, and del Potro has suffered an injury scare, which has to happen before any event can truly get under way. Federer and Djokovic have pulled out, citing niggles, and breaking the heart of least one tournament director. Andy Roddick has returned, sporting Mardy Fish's socks. But before I grow too immersed in the lamentably fleeting grass season, here are some *visions fugitives* left over from Paris:

The Rankings

The big story was a change that did not happen, courtesy of a pre-ordained final that never took place. I speak of course of Djokovic claiming the Roland Garros title and thereby wresting the top spot from Rafael Nadal. The Streak, as it will be wondering dubbed by future historians, had by now generated its own internal logic, part of which dictated that past results should count for little, the standard conceit of any new-world-order narrative. From the rubble shall emerge . . . well, you know how it goes. Perspective is the first thing to go whenever a player goes on a tear. The incredible fact that Djokovic hadn't been beaten led some to the impertinent belief that he couldn't be, which was only buttressed as the Serb galloped through his early rounds and Nadal almost foundered. Indeed, the concern arose that the world No.1

might not meet his obligations. Come Sunday evening, and Nadal was still standing, and he is still world No.1, though only by a whisker.

The other ranking stories included a pair of Americans percolating into the top ten: Mardy Fish is up to No.9 after a best-ever third round effort, while Andy Roddick returns to No.10 despite not going to Paris at all, courtesy of Jurgen Melzer's sudden plunge. Viktor Troicki is now at No.12. He broke new ground by reaching the fourth round at a major, but ploughed a very worn paddock by choking badly when he should have gone on with it. Special mention should also be made of Juan Ignacio Chela, the veteran who cleaned up on a ransacked part of the draw and progressed to the quarterfinals, something he has done no fewer than 11 times at significant events, and then not won any of them. He has moved up to No.20.

Roger Federer

Most of what needs to be said about Roger Federer has been, and no one has really gotten it wrong. His knowing grin and raised index finger after that pulsating semifinal said it all: you discount the greatest player in history at your peril. The narrative leading into Paris was all about Nadal and Djokovic, but you can bet it won't be as we move to London, and not merely because Federer is a six time champion. He is confident, aggressive, and punctuating streaks of unplayable serving with patches of unplayable everything, a tough combination on grass. It won't be a question of who is unlucky enough to have him in their half, but of who is unlucky enough to be in his. Or he might lose in the first round. Wouldn't that be something?

Nicolas Almagro

Several days prior to the French Open commencing, Nicolas Almagro paused whilst opening his umbrella inside under a ladder as a black cat crossed his path. He was also planning an expedition to Egypt, whereupon he would desecrate the tombs of several mummies, and Turin, where he would wipe his backside on the Shroud. None of this would have the slightest influence on his campaign in Paris, since he was already playing (and winning) in Nice, and was thus irredeemably cursed. His first round exit at Roland Garros capped a perfectly disappointing European clay season, and after the briefest of sojourns in the top ten, he has fallen to No.15. He won't climb higher for quite some time.

The Coverage

I like Mats Wilander, who seems like a genuine guy. I like that tour bus thing he drives around America giving out impromptu tennis lessons, a charming idea that vaguely recalls Sviatoslav Richter's mission to bring the classical piano recital to the benighted peasants of Siberia. I also confess eternal respect for Wilander's 1988 season, in which he won three majors and gained the No.1 ranking, apparently motivated by little more than a desire to punish Ivan Lendl's hubris. Unfortunately, when it comes to commentary, Wilander is the colour guy granted too free a rein, and the calls invariably devolve into a Mats monologue, periodically relieved by plugs for his nightly round-up show. Early rounds proved soul-mirring, but, for a wonder, Wilander was nowhere to be heard in the later rounds.

Otherwise Frew, Simon and the gang were no worse than usual, and I assiduously avoided Barbara Schett. It was nice to see Gustavo Kuerten amble in for a chat. Meanwhile, rival networks offered no fatter pickings. Mark Woodforde still doesn't realise there is no 'k' on the end of 'thing', and the avuncular Fred Stolle is progressively losing the plot. Thus did we delight in that semifinal between Federer and Ivanovic.

The Grasscourt Season (July)

You Can't Have Everything

Of all the tournaments huddled in the shadows of the majors, Queens and Halle are in the most awkward position, as are the top players around whom these events are currently marketed. In part this owes to Wimbledon commencing only two weeks after Roland Garros ends, although it also owes something to the two most dominant players of the era developing a taste for the Channel Slam.

The last man with such tastes was Bjorn Borg, who achieved it no fewer than 27 times, if memory serves. Since his retirement it fell rather out of fashion for a few decades, until Rafael Nadal broke Roger Federer's heart by taking away his most treasured bit of silverware, and then biting it. Since 2008 however, the whole thing has become decidedly *de rigueur*. My two-year-old son has known nothing else, and my five-year-old daughter has only the dimmest memory of being hauled out of bed to celebrate Federer's 2007 victory, though it will eventually resurface in therapy. When I explained to them both at considerable length just how difficult a feat the Channel Slam is - in a presentation heavy on flowchart and graph - they merely stared back blankly. *Point made*.

In any case, you don't have to win the French Open and Wimbledon to find their juxtaposition wearying. Roland Garros can prove sufficiently gruelling even for the quarter-finalists, as attested to by a dinged-up Fabio Fognini, or even for the fans. The upshot of these considerations is that both Halle and Queens have compelling reasons for withdrawals coming at them from both directions. An exhausted French Open finalist is likely to be, well, exhausted, while an injured one will be unwilling to risk pressing the issue so close to Wimbledon.

This precisely describes the situation with Federer this week, whose form in Paris was impressive, but not so impressive that he could breeze through the final two rounds unscathed. He spent a long time on court last week, attacking the sport's two greatest defenders on the sport's slowest surface. In doing so he apparently sustained a minor groin injury, and, having decided that idleness is the better part of prudence, he has pulled out of Halle. Halle's tournament director was livid, but really

he must have seen it coming, as last Sunday's final entered its fourth hour. Federer, who has won Halle five times already, might rightfully point out that he owes them little, and that he stuffed his back there last year.

Regardless, proximity to Wimbledon, and the criminally short grass court season, means that both Queens and Halle command far better fields than any comparable event slotted the week after a major. Players boasting meagre grass court credentials will turn up even while injured, since they need all the exposure they can get. Djokovic and Federer notwithstanding, just about everyone has fronted up.

Happily, both tournaments have thus far bucked the season's prevailing fashion for an early and massive seed-haemorrhage. The seeds have mostly fared well. Two rounds in, and last night pulled out the best line-up of matches shy of a good Masters event. Sadly, few of the matches lived up to their billing, but you can't have everything. Nalbandian - Verdasco fizzed, as did Kohlschreiber - Dolgoplov. Del Potro was upset, and Nadal dropped a set and fell over against Stepanek. The most impressive player was Gael Monfils. On grass. In Germany. Who saw that coming?

Tonight's line up looks even better.

The Rule of Pairs

Kohlschreiber d. Hewitt, 7/6 6/3

Tsonga d. Nadal, 6/7 6/4 6/1

Roddick d. Verdasco, 6/2 6/2

The best day's line up since yesterday provided some better play, and an uneasy sense of things happening in pairs: both defending champions went out, two Brits made the last four at Queens, two Germans made the semis in Halle, two Frenchmen impressed mightily, and two things happened that haven't happened in a long time, namely that Rafael Nadal lost to someone other than Novak Djokovic, and that Andy Roddick played imposingly well. These goings-on all interlock, which may seem cosmically significant, but isn't.

Lleyton Hewitt fell to Philip Kohlschreiber, a victory for German patriots and aesthetes and lovers of tremendous ball striking, the last of which includes Hewitt. It somewhat eases the pressure on the Australian. He now has no titles to defend, and courtesy of his busy schedule of surgery and aborted comebacks he won't have a top 100 ranking to worry about either. Somehow, in spite of it all, he still believes he's a chance at the majors - a living advertisement for psychotically positive thinking - though it'll be interesting to see if he still believes it whilst submitting to Qualifying, and after he has cleared 30.

Andy Murray has come out this week and decried the slowness of the Queens grass, which as an assessment hardly gels with my overall viewing experience. It seems pretty slick to me, although that impression may partly owe to how poorly some players are transitioning from the clay, or just how rubbish they are on grass in the first place. Either way, it is clearly too fast for real tennis, and therefore for Fernando Verdasco. Fortunately, Roddick was unreal, for the first time in years.

Normal Service Resumes

Queens, Final

Halle, Final

Kohlschreiber d. Petzschner, 7/6 2/0 ret.

The story overnight was of a final without a finale and a final that couldn't start. The first saw the first all-German final in Germany since 1973 fizzle to a dispirited default. The second, as typical drizzle washed against London, saw Andy Murray and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga honing their table tennis skills in the player's lounge. These miraculous goings-on were duly captured by eager reporters, and were thus elevated to the status of Media-Event, with the players cast as battlers battling on and making do. Stiff upper lip, and all that.

It's hard to know what to make of it: the facilities seem very nice, and the table was in good nick. Quite a scoop. Murray and Tsonga's friendly handclasp looked genuine enough, especially for two guys due to decide a fairly prestigious tournament.

Luckily, both are too important to be playing anywhere else this week. They have all the time in the world. Murray can work on enhancing that grin of his, which was flashed briefly after he thrashed Roddick in the semifinal, but not since.

Meanwhile in Halle, Philipp Kohlschreiber has captured his third career title, testament to an outstanding week in which he saw off two seeds (Dolgoplov and Monfils) and the defending champion (Hewitt). His victory over Hewitt proved especially significant, mostly because it has sent Hewitt outside the top hundred, an indignity not lessened by Kohlschreiber cheekily kitting himself out in Australia's Davis Cup uniform.

Both Kohlschreiber and Petzschner have displayed superb grass court skills this week, placing them among a small minority of Tour players, who have otherwise mostly looked inept, tired or slow. Other exceptions included Roddick and Monfils. However, the former sadly reverted to the passive noodling that has so characterised the latter part of his career, whilst the latter managed to get injured. Normal service has resumed.

Sod-Kissing

Queens, Final

Murray d. Tsonga, 3/6 7/6 6/4

There is a winsome brashness to Jo-Wilfried Tsonga's approach to the net - his net approach - a vibe and bravura far from the solemn ineptitude of Andy Roddick's endeavours, which somehow treat the chip-charge as an extension of his dour ground game, and not, as it should be, a blessed relief from it. Serve aside, Tsonga steams in behind bigger stuff, but there's a commensurate level of bluff. His superior athleticism means he's holding better cards, naturally, but it's the ebullience with which he conducts his forays that proves the difference. He genuinely wants to win at the net, regardless of how good he is at it.

He isn't bad at the net, but he *is* limited. For all that his drop volleys are excellent, any volley he must push deep is destined to sit up begging to be dealt with, like a

dandelion. Like a lad with a five-iron, Murray invariably dealt with them. Even so, anything passing within about eight feet of the Frenchman saw him explode horizontally sideways. Even that great sod-kisser Boris Becker hardly dove so relentlessly in a single match, although Italian strikers can be trusted to do so.

All told, today's was an outstanding final, featuring some of the most charmingly virtuosic tennis of recent times, eliciting gasps and titters and whoops from the jaded crowd and the even more jaded hacks in the commentary box. At one point, as Murray struck a deft tweener pass from the baseline, only for Tsonga to cut it off with yet another airborne diving volley, the Scot almost succumbed to a smile, and Frew McMillan almost let his reserve crack. Almost. McMillan steadfastly refused to lose it even when Tsonga pulled off a running *one-handed* backhand pass up the line. No grin from Murray on that one, either.

The Eurosport sundries know no such qualms. Tsonga in sparkling flight is a pleasure to watch, admittedly. Apparently, he is also a pleasure to commentate, if the welter of thread-bare Ali comparisons is anything to go by. He has a big serve, and a big forehand, though neither is truly *huge*, and the various boxing analogies have always sounded forced. Both strokes are doubtless hit harder than, say, Federer's, but neither *feels* as big, and they certainly aren't as effective, as Ali-esque.

What Tsonga has however, is enthusiasm, and it is infectious. As the second set got underway his unswerving audacity looked fit to tear the crowd away from Murray as surely as it was the match. Gradually, however, Murray began to up the pace and variety in his strokes, and the English were jolted back into the recollection that they were actually British, and the contempt they feel for the Scots pales beside the loathing they feel towards the French.

The key moment in the match came at 5/5 in the second, as Murray fell to 15-40. If Tsonga broke, there was a pretty good chance he'd serve it out. Somehow Murray fought back to hold. A tiebreaker ensued, which is when Tsonga fell apart for the precise reason he always does: none. His hitherto measured aggression grew mildly unhinged. It is a shame that the most pivotal period of the match was the flattest, and that an otherwise brilliant final hinged on a truly poor breaker, in which the imposing

Frenchman stopped diving, and fell in a dull heap. The third set, sadly, felt foregone. The vim had drained from Tsonga's game, and Murray just grew stronger, and faster.

It was a deserved win for the Scot, and nuclear fuel for the hype-machine, with Wimbledon only a week away.

Luck of the Draw: Wimbledon 2011

If tennis draws are rigged - that cherished belief of the zealots and crackpots - then you'd imagine whoever rigged the Wimbledon draw today should have done a better job at masking their handiwork. It just looks so *obvious*. That they haven't covered their tracks apparently indicates nothing more than a brazen willingness to thumb their nose at all that is sacred, or so the reasoning goes. And so what if it is the AELTC conducting the draw, an organisation whose slavish veneration of tradition is exceeded only by the Catholic Church's, and even then not by much? Well, clearly they are willing to violate any number of traditions in order to achieve their clear goal, which is world domination by any means possible, including perpetual singles finals featuring Nadal and Federer.

Astoundingly, Federer and Nadal are once more on opposite sides of the draw, and once again drawn to meet Djokovic and Murray in the semifinals respectively. Admittedly, this happens a lot at the majors. There's not much else to say about it. It has happened again. It's unlikely that all four will make it to the final four. That hasn't happened in weeks. It's also nearly two weeks off, so any musings can wait.

Of more immediate interest are the first rounds. Lest you somehow hadn't heard, Isner and Mahut have been drawn to meet. (What are the chances?) One to watch, to be sure, though I'll extend my neck and suggest it may not go the distance, especially this pair's interpretation of 'the distance'. Mahut's form hasn't been tremendous, and he is apparently struggling with a foot injury. Still, it will be one of those myriad first week Media Events, which mercifully peter out by the second week but seem vital enough at the time. Janko Tipsarevic has been drawn to meet Ivo Karlovic, a tough one to pick. Tipsarevic is looking a reasonable chance to capture

his maiden title in Eastbourne this week, barring an unlikely and therefore wholly characteristic disaster.

Assuming he turns up, Lleyton Hewitt will face Kei Nishikori. It is a testament to how far Hewitt has fallen that this can now be considered an enticing first round.

Nishikori's ranking has lately slipped from its high of 46 - agonisingly short of realising Project 45 - though it hasn't slipped into the subterranean depths Hewitt now inhabits. Actually, the more I think on it, this probably won't be a first round to savour at all, although you can bet it'll be headlining the Australian television coverage. Speaking of a receding ranking, and patchy form, and injuries, and overblown media-interest in the home country, James Black will open against Marcos Baghdatis, who until this week hadn't managed back-to-back wins since February. Still, the Cypriot is doing well in 's-Hertogenbosch, although as I write this he's just attempted to serve out the first set, been broken to love, and then flubbed the tiebreak. Expect more of the same against Blake. Balls will be struck tremendously, and very few of them will go in when it matters.

Soderling versus Petzschner has upset written all over it, again assuming the German is fit, since he withdrew from the Halle final last week. Speaking of which, Fabio Fognini will face Milos Raonic. I'm not as sold on Raonic's chances as some others. The real hope is that Fognini does something zany and dramatic, and thereby generates a Media Event. Naturally he will, since he must. The whole thing is rigged anyway.

Eternal Bridesmaid

Eastbourne, Final

Seppi d. (3) Tipsarevic, 7/6 3/6 5/3 ret.

Janko Tipsarevic remains the highest profile player without a career title, although, thanks to Florian Mayer's recent resurgence, he at least isn't the highest ranked. This is probably cold comfort, given that today the Serb was overwhelmingly favoured to win Eastbourne. The deck was stacked: a 3-0 head-to-head against his opponent Andreas Seppi, a ranking 21 places higher, and he was decidedly more

rested, having already mastered the lousy conditions and a lousier Kei Nishikori earlier in the day.

Seppi, by contrast, is a dirt-balling journeyman who'd struggled through his delayed semifinal in three awkward sets. The Serb is more talented, boasts a wider array of strokes, greater power, and routinely graces far more illustrious venues. He took Roger Federer to 10/8 in the fifth, for God's sake. On the other hand, he's also a mercurial head-case with a tendency to drop his bundle, and about as capable of weathering pressure as the protagonists of the novels we're endlessly told he's read. Werther and Raskolnikov don't have any ATP titles. Think about it.

As far as I can remember, they also didn't win any sportsmanship awards, and after today I presume Tipsarevic won't be handed one, either. Having ground back to 3/4 in the final set, he then slipped and seriously hurt himself, which was a shame, but provided a useful excuse to remonstrate further with the umpire. He was told to get on with it, and eventually did. However, the Will To Power promptly deserted him, and he was broken again.

Seppi stepped up to serve for his maiden title. The guy has been on tour since 2002, and has only contested one other final (Gstaad 2007). Tipsarevic, surely, should have realised how tight the Italian would be. Fabio Fognini certainly would have, and would have commenced lustily swinging at any object within reach. But Tipsarevic, wrapped in a solipsistic miasma, could no longer see past his own navel, and at 15-0 down he marched to the net and defaulted, pointlessly denying Seppi the pleasure of serving out his first title. Really, Tipsarevic could have just planted himself on the baseline and watched some aces go by. It might have proved good practice for his upcoming Wimbledon first round against Ivo Karlovic. Now there's a deft machination by a capricious cosmos.

Speaking of Wimbledon, the Australian broadcaster has started trying to pique viewer interest, assuming those viewers were tuned in to 7TWO at 9.30am on a Sunday morning, in which case they were treated to no fewer than three Wimbledon programs. The first, the official 2010 commemorative film, ably demonstrated just how unmemorable last year's event was, Isner-Mahut aside. The second - *The Spirit of Wimbledon* - was the best of them. Structured around an evocative retelling of the

1980 Men's Final, it laudably resisted the urge to mention Andy Murray at every opportunity, or indeed at all. The third, a shorter preview piece, knew no such restraint. Aside from some glaring factual inaccuracies - Sampras did not win 15 majors - it mainly traced the recent form of the big three, and asked whether they can pose a realistic challenge to Murray. The consensus among the various talking heads was that they could indeed, notwithstanding their superior rankings, vast experience, and tendency to win whenever they show up.

Those Little Flags

Wimbledon, First Round

Tomic d. (29) Davydenko, 7/5 6/3 7/5

Hewitt d. Nishikori, 6/1 7/6 6/7 6/3

Last week, my boss participated in the CEO Sleepout, a fund raising event at which scores of managing directors, politicians and sundry men-about-town were granted the opportunity to spend a night out on the street, the better to lobby each other away from prying eyes, much like real homeless people do. Commendably, various millions of dollars were raised. More importantly, following a night of privation, soul searching and light drizzle, many of Australia's top executives now know exactly what it feels like to queue for tickets at Wimbledon. Success had more or less insulated them from this type of experience, which differed from the London one only insofar as it lacked vocal knots of canary-yellow clad hooligans bellowing 'Come On!' at the insistence of passing reporters. Wimbledon's official Australian broadcaster has changed this year, but the clichés haven't, including these tired interviews with the tedious Fanatics, yet another example of television bringing people into our lounge room we wouldn't otherwise allow into our house. A night on the footpath had done them few favours, although their penchant for lusty exhortation appeared undiminished.

Speaking of fanatical patriotism, Channel 7 has recycled their idea of putting a little Australian flag next to the Australian player's names, an idea they unleashed to such cringeworthy effect at the Australian Open. Presumably market research has

suggested that many viewers don't know who the Australians are, and are at risk of supporting players for reasons other than shared citizenship. It was discovered that otherwise red-blooded Australians were even cheering for *foreigners*. As ever, there are no flags next to the foreign player's names. Thus the merely casual viewer might have wondered where, say, Juan Ignacio Chela hails from, though there were granted enough information to know they wanted Marinko Matosevic to thrash him. As it happened, he didn't thrash him, though he did eke out a set.

For Australian fans thus enamoured by accidents of birth, the heart-warming news is that both Lleyton Hewitt and Bernard Tomic won three sets each in their matches, and were summarily awarded victory. Tomic's victory was on paper an upset: straight sets against the No.29 seed Nikolay Davydenko. However, 'hard' barely begins to describe the times Davydenko has fallen on, and he was never much chop on grass, anyway. Tomic, on the other hand, has performed well as a junior here, and his fundamentally weird and arrhythmic approach would have posed issues for the Russian even in the latter's prime, which was all of 18 months ago. Still, straight sets . . . Hewitt had a rather tougher time of it against Kei Nishikori, who made the semifinals at Eastbourne last week, and thus joined a host of players in proving that doing well the week before a major is about the worst preparation possible. (The Nice curse strikes again; both Tipsarevic and Dodig are also out.) That being said, Hewitt is hardly a gimme first round at Wimbledon. Today he played well in patches, and the old fight remains. A willing spirit counts for a lot, especially here. Men's tennis may have moved on, but on grass it hasn't moved on quite so far. Variety is still amply rewarded, and an experienced campaigner with the ability to explore more of the court can make hay, ironically in the first week when the sward is lushest. Of course, it still favours big serving, too, a fact that Milos Raonic is celebrating by championing a return to short shorts.

It is for this reason – variety, not short shorts - that the Philips Kohlschreiber and Petzschner were expected to go far. Both were finalists in Halle, where both displayed their excellent grass pedigree. Kohlschreiber, however, fell to Denis Istomin for no reason at all, while Petzschner went down to Robin Soderling in an entertaining four-setter. He could well have won it, but will now become merely the first step in a very tough draw for the Swede, who next faces Hewitt. Channel 7, via

the miracle of the promo, has already commenced explaining to me that this will be rather a big deal, and that I'd do well to get behind Our Lleyton, if I know what's good for me.

Expected Upsets

Wimbledon, Second Round

If an upset is not unexpected, is it still an upset? If a defective seed tumbles in the forest, does anyone really give a toss? If that's too philosophical: if Stanislas Wawrinka is hand-carted out of Wimbledon in three sets by Simone Bolelli, should we feign surprise? How about Fernando Verdasco going out in four sets to Robin Haase? Juan Ignacio Chela out in three sets to Alex Bogomolov Jr., including a bagel? They were all seeds, and the rankings differential was in each case profound, but surely no one expected any of these guys to go deep. Presumably they could have won, and no one would have minded much, but if they had to go out, it might as well be now.

Concerning the seeds of whom anything was realistically expected, none were troubled at all. Nadal, Berdych, Murray, Roddick, Monfils, Fish and Gasquet dropped a single set between them. Of the seeds for whom great things were hoped, perhaps unrealistically - Milos Raonic - the news is rather less encouraging. Up an early break against Gilles Muller, he slipped and tumbled heavily, and could not continue. Muller, ranked a terrifying 92, will now face Nadal in the third round. Much ado is being made of the fact that Muller is the last player other than Federer to defeat Nadal at Wimbledon, notwithstanding that it happened back in 2005, when Muller was in his prime and Nadal was in his adolescence. I am wearily reminded of Federer's quarterfinal with Mario Ancic in 2006, which generated ludicrous hype based on the Croat being the last man to defeat the mighty Swiss at the All England Club four years earlier. Displaying no patience for such foolishness, Federer saw him off in three very straight sets. Expect Nadal to inflict similar treatment on Muller.

Hopefully the tournament will kick into gear tonight, with Soderling and Hewitt headlining. The Australian broadcaster is keenly spruiking the match's merits. Their

head-to-head is essentially meaningless given both players boast such radically segmented careers. Since Soderling became Soderling, and since Hewitt stopped being Hewitt, they've split a pair of encounters, but have never met on grass. Even without Channel 7 telling me so, I suspect Hewitt has a chance.

The Paradox of Experience and Decline

Wimbledon, Second Round

(5) Soderling d. Hewitt, 6/7 3/6 7/5 6/4 6/4

The choice of commentary, ultimately, came down to Greg Rusedski or John Newcombe. Who was less unbearable? On the one hand, Newcombe's approach was neatly summed up by the man himself: 'I'm sorry if that sounds biased, but I am!' On the other hand, Rusedski's capacity to say almost nothing at narcoleptic length promised to make a potentially epic match feel merely endless. In the end I went with Newk, not out of any special sense of patriotism, but because his unrelenting encomiums could grow out of proportion when things got tight, or if Hewitt got ahead. There's a certain interest in witnessing someone go off their nut.

As it happened, Hewitt did get ahead, though Newk regrettably held it together for the most part. This was a shame, for if ever there was a moment to give it up it was as the Australian broke in the second set, courtesy of a miraculous diving, somersaulting backhand pass that brought even Hewitt up short, staring at his box in disbelief before launching into the usual routine of come-ons and that hand-to-the-forehand thing he tried to trademark some years back. There were also a couple of full-stretch diving volleys that nearly did for Newk's heart. I'm pretty sure that's how he'd want to go.

Through two and a half sets, today's match recalled Hewitt's victory over Juan Martin del Potro here two years ago, a succinct example of grass-court nous and variety trumping a uni-dimensional power baseline game. On that occasion del Potro demonstrated little inclination or capacity to vary a losing gameplan, until the end maintaining his determination to hit through an unyielding opponent. Today it appeared as though Soderling might display similar limitations. 'It looks like he has

no Plan B,' remarked Newcombe wonderingly, and not a little derisively. His man was ahead, and there was just no way Hewitt was losing this thing from two sets up. Some stats were paraded to the effect that Hewitt hadn't lost at Wimbledon after claiming the first set in years. Not to be outdone, I turned to my wife and informed her that this pair had split their last two meetings, and that in both cases the winner had dropped the opening set, thus proving that stats can prove anything, and that I'm just a huge tennis nerd.

It has been demonstrated convincingly that Soderling's service motion creates certain limitations, most notably in that he lacks an effective slider. His wide serve to the deuce court comes in flatter and harder than those of other players, enabled by his height and excellent extension, deriving its potency from pace rather than placement. In short, it doesn't slide. With that being said, it appears to be a limitation he has been addressing, since today his wide serves were landing wider and breaking more sharply than has hitherto been the case. Nonetheless, it remains a glaring omission from his repertoire. Hewitt's slider, though boasting nothing like the raw pace of his opponent's, was considerably more effective. He went relentlessly at Soderling's forehand, even second serves, reflecting a determination to break that wing down, clearly a tactic he and Tony Roche had thrashed out beforehand. The theory is that despite Soderling's forehand rating among the sport's more feared weapons, it is an all-or-nothing shot, and faced with sufficient variety and the vagaries of the surface, it might turn out to be nothing more often than it was all. And so it proved, for a while. Despite Hewitt's abysmal first serve percentage in the first few sets, the near-unrelenting forehand attack yielded countless fluffed returns, which consequently infected the groundstrokes.⁵ Most of Soderling's unforced errors were generated from that wing.

The change came late in the third, with the match finely balanced. Whereas he'd looked flustered at the deaths of sets one and two, Soderling now looked incongruously serene. He began to take some pace off his groundstrokes, which in real terms means he began to hit them about as hard as Hewitt was. He began to bunt or even slice his forehand returns, forcing Hewitt to make the pace. He reigned

⁵Hewitt's percentages have always been poor, though it's worth reminding ourselves that pre-Roddick there was a general conviction that anything above 55% meant you weren't going for enough, or that you were a girly claycourter. Now most top players hover in the mid-sixties.

in his aggression, and although his winners remained numerous, they became natural extensions of the rally. It turned out he did have a Plan B, and this was it, and it was working. Admirably, Newk conceded as much. Hewitt was broken whilst serving to stay in each set, and it moved to a decider.

Momentum lurched back the Australian's way as he broke early in the fifth, but he soon yielded it back. Then, for the third set in a row, he saved his worst for the moment he needed his best, as he was serving to stay in the match. Soderling's calmness has allowed him to rise into the elite, but Hewitt, mentally, is no longer the man who once dismantled Pete Sampras at Flushing Meadows. Four loose errors later and four hours in, and it was over. Soderling was chuffed, and rightly so. His draw is utterly uncivilised, but he is still standing.

Hewitt was stoic and gracious, as he invariably is in defeat. Tough losses to high-quality opponents have defined his late career. Think of Gonzalez or Nalbandian in Melbourne. He is now mired well outside the top hundred, yet he can push any number of top players to the very brink. It's a paradox, mostly owing to that rare mix of experience and decline that defines fading champions, and one he might resolve only by winning more, or by leaving the game for good.

The Future Thus Assured

Wimbledon, Second Round

Tomic d. Andreev, 4/6 5/7 6/3 6/4 6/1

John Newcombe was back in full voice for the concluding sets of Bernard Tomic's five-set win over Igor Andreev, a victory that has apparently saved Australian men's tennis, in much the same way that Tennis Australia hasn't. Each set's contrasting vibe was masterfully captured in Newk's commentary. The mounting tension of the fourth set found expression via dire mutterings about Tomic's court position and second serve, which were too deep and pissweak, respectively. These musings gave way to triumphant if overwrought panegyrics in the fifth, like a lost verse of *Advance Australia Fair*, and including the bold assertion that the young Australian boasts a superior backhand slice to Roger Federer's. He doesn't, but forgive

Newcombe his follies, for it was a stirring win. It also means that when the rankings are next released Tomic will be the highest ranked Australian male player. The future of Australian tennis is thus assured, apparently, although that assurance is rather diminished if we consider that had Tomic lost, Marinko Matosevic would have been top dog. And anyway, surely having only one good player at a time is why Australian men's tennis is in this mess? Even Switzerland, which has the greatest player ever, finds it useful to maintain a spare.

Playing offside, Todd Woodbridge made a telling if slightly obvious point when he remarked that the passive and weird way Tomic rallies owes a great deal to the ease with which he dominated the juniors. If he could win all his matches like that he would, and so far through a lauded junior career, he mostly has. It's the kind of game designed to transfigure an opponent's off day into a very embarrassing one, an arrhythmic and nearly unpatterned assault that demands unwavering concentration and iron discipline, which are the things most juniors lack. So is it any surprise that his professional highlights have come against Feliciano Lopez, or Marin Cilic?

That said, it's pretty obvious to everyone – even to Tomic himself, and maybe even to his father – that this style doesn't particularly impress the very best. Just picture the day out Djokovic would have. To that end, Tomic played Nadal very differently back in Melbourne, where he wedded aggression to the inescapable variety, and refused to back off the baseline, to the world No.1's sustained consternation. That is what was so fascinating about Tomic's fifth set against Andreev today. Tomic grew most imposing at the precise point when it was least required. Down a few breaks, the Russian was basically done, and Tomic could have safely noodled his way to the win from a couple of metres shy of the baseline. But he stepped in and began upping the pace, scorching backhands up the line, biting his slices, foraying into the forecourt, and injecting pop and variety into a hitherto powder-puff second serve.

This would seem to run counter to Woodbridge's assessment. (And it's worth bearing in mind that despite Woodbridge's lightweight media personality and his apparent eagerness to meet the surely-onerous requirements of cross-promoting whatever he is told to, he's an all-time great who has had a lot to do with Tomic.) But if Tomic at his most comfortable grows more passive, then what do we make of that fifth set, in which he betrayed a Federer-like tendency to lift dramatically when *least* threatened?

He didn't exactly run away with that fourth set; he took it by breaking against the run of play, camped back in Monfils-territory. Having barely forced a decider, it's doubtful whether he was tuning his game up for Robin Soderling in the next round. That would entail arrogance to the point of lunacy from an 18-yearold attempting to reach his first Wimbledon third round, against a mercurial tour veteran with the capacity to transmute frustration into a torrent of forehand winners. I doubt Tomic felt this match was won until it actually was.

As it happened, Andreev's frustration blossomed into nothing more fearsome than petulance. For a career also-ran now half a decade past his best, it was a humiliating way to go out, being broken three times. On a couple of those breaks, he shaped up to smash his racquet, but each time thought better of it. By the end, he just looked resigned.

Varying Efficacy

Wimbledon, Third Round

(Q) Tomic d. (5) Soderling, 6/1 6/4 7/5

My heartfelt determination to leave off writing about Bernard Tomic for a while has hit a snag, namely that by defeating Robin Soderling and moving through to the fourth round, he has become the standout story of a mostly unremarkable first week. As for last night's match - the teenager's debut on Centre Court against a fancied Swede with a recently-demonstrated taste for Australian meat - there isn't a great deal that needs to be added. Soderling was suffering from something or other; apparently he felt dizzy and nauseous, that queasy vertigo that occurs when the ground drops giddily away. Down 0/5 after eleven minutes, that's probably how it felt. Tomic, in that first set, was virtually unplayable, if only for an opponent who thrives on rhythm, pace, and not having to lunge forward to dig up out-spun forehand junkballs, followed by a dead slice, or a knifed slice, or a floated slice, or a crushed backhand up the line or a dropshot or a forehand drive or a . . . well, you get the picture. Playing Tomic is hard work, and Soderling literally did not have the stomach for it.

The Rest

Following that anachronistic middle Sunday break, the second Monday at Wimbledon is arguably the greatest single day in men's tennis, with all sixteen remaining men scheduled to play. However, for a certain type of tennis fan - namely aficionados of the godlike forehand - yesterday was probably about as good as it gets. Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Juan Martin del Potro, Fernando Gonzalez, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Robin Soderling were all playing their trade, with varying efficacy.

Prior to commencement, Federer and Nalbandian's 19th instalment was likely to be the pick of the day's encounters, although in the end it definitely was not. Federer yielded an early break, but was otherwise in scant peril. The highlights all came on the three squandered matchpoints. The actual pick of the day was Tsonga's pulsating dismissal of Gonzalez, which might have been competitive, had Tsonga not so dramatically exceeded his usual standard. As it was, the Chilean slapped some vintage forehands, but was otherwise hit off the court, which was no shame since just about anybody would have been. Speaking of slapping vintage forehands, del Potro emphatically did not against Gilles Simon, instead remaining merely composed whilst the Frenchman grew sadly erratic, a tendency at odds with his character, though not his nationality. Overall a very disappointing match.

Djokovic's four set win over a vaguely resurgent Marcos Baghdatis provided rather more interest, not necessarily for the result, which was largely guaranteed, but by how it brought forth the turmoil roiling below the Serbian's cocky bonhomie. The Streak may be gone, but he remains within hailing distance of the top ranking, and tension rides his shoulder like a hawk, its talons gouging deeper with each miss. Since that semifinal in Paris there have been numerous hints of the old Djokovic, the one who grins with dark wryness when Federer saves breakpoints with aces, who worries that, ultimately, it just isn't meant to be. It is almost inevitable that he will achieve the No.1 position, but if he's this tight chasing it, how will he fare when he must defend it? He faces Michael Llodra next.

Found Very Out

The central narrative of Wimbledon 2011 has thus far followed those players who aren't of the top four, yet have progressed to the final eight. That the top four are there as well no longer merits a chapter apparently, although they will presumably feature heavily as the tale climaxes. The fact that two of the other quarterfinalists hail from Australia and the USA - where the rich tennis tradition is pronounced dead on an hourly basis - has certainly helped. That neither player is Lleyton Hewitt or Andy Roddick is downright astonishing.

(1) Nadal v (10) Fish

The American is Mardy Fish, who yesterday saw off the defending runner-up Tomas Berdych in straight sets, and who will rise into the top eight even if he progresses no further. Berdych will fall to No.9, and is lucky not to fall lower. Points in the 10-20 range are just so very scarce. Fish has always had the game for grass, but never had a body for tennis. Now he has both, and here he is.

Rafael Nadal is there, too, despite enduring a pretty tense dust-up with Juan Martin del Potro in the fourth round. The world No.1 broke his foot or something at 6/5 in the first set, and was in some doubt to continue. He was permitted an immediate medical timeout when he probably shouldn't have been: it would be hard to argue that his condition was an emergency, and that a sore foot couldn't have waited until after the tiebreak. He also attracted an inevitable warning for excessive tardiness between points, but was not then docked a point when he failed to display the slightest alacrity thereafter. It's hard to fault Nadal in either case, and it's easy to fault Carlos Ramos, since the token and arbitrary enforcement of rules looks worse than no enforcement at all.

Nadal has since undergone an MRI on his foot, and no issue could be found, which helps explain why he was able to run around very quickly for several hours on it. There is thus every chance he will take the court for the quarterfinal. Fish would do well to make him run and stretch, and will do well to take a set. Nadal's foot and Fish's nerve - especially holding it on serve - will determine the outcome.

(4) Murray v Lopez

It was only by the narrowest of margins that there aren't two Qualifiers in the quarterfinals. Lukasz Kubot earned two matchpoints in the third set tiebreak against Feliciano Lopez, including one on his own serve, which vanished in a flurry of volleys insufficiently put away and a crushed passing shot. A routine straight set upset thereafter blossomed into an dramatic and atavistic epic - the net was rushed often by burly men playing those shots where you don't let the ball bounce, 'volleys' my Dad calls them - although the quality wasn't as high as the bafflingly skewed Wimbledon stats suggest. Apparently the only way to commit an unforced error this year is to miss a chest-high forehand within a metre of the net.

Andy Murray's victory over Richard Gasquet was a perfunctory fizzer, a shame for a match that promised so much, which is basically what will be chiselled into the Frenchman's tombstone. The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge turned up, and Murray afterwards graced them with a bow that appeared highly ironic, although it was perhaps merely stiff and unpracticed, understandable given it was delivered by a Scottish tennis player, and not a concert pianist or an 18th century courtier. Prince William gave a hearty grin. That is one charming man.

One doubts whether Murray will have much more trouble against Lopez, who would need to play considerably better than he did in defeating Roddick, considered to rank among his career wins. His lefty serve is a monster on this surface, but he hasn't faced a returner of Murray's calibre yet - meaning he hasn't faced Djokovic - and it's almost inevitable that his very creaky ground game will get found very out.

(3) Federer v (12) Tsonga

Proving emphatically that there is momentum to be gained from a strong showing at Queens, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga has numbered among the more fearsome and complete performers through Wimbledon's early going, which makes his date with Roger Federer both the pick of the quarterfinals, and the trickiest to pick. For Federer, victory will hinge on being Roger Federer, or, more specifically, his serve, his willingness to molest the Frenchman's backhand, and his assertiveness on breakpoints. Undeniably, Tsonga's returning has shown dramatic improvement, but

he has faced no one as lethal as the six-time champion, who has been impeccable since arriving in Paris five weeks ago.

Nonetheless, there were flat patches in Federer's otherwise hugely engaging victory over Mikhail Youzhny in the fourth round, the kind of lapses that have liberally peppered his late career, but which have been laudably rare of late. Against Youzhny, it cost him a tight first set, and might have cost him the fourth had he not been so far ahead. The latter stages of the world's most prestigious tournament are probably not the ideal time to regress to type. Federer invariably lifts as the draw pares down, but even in his tediously-missed heyday he was never much chop on break points. For Tsonga, victory over Federer will thus depend on his hold game, which means a great deal more than merely serving. He has served beautifully so far, it's true, but he has also backed it up with typical gusto off the ground and at the net, and an atypical commitment to not blow it. Being French, he is genetically obliged to throw in one truly appalling service game per set, and Federer's capacity to capitalise on these moments will likely prove definitive.

(2) Djokovic v (Q) Tomic

Australian qualifier Bernard Tomic has of course been the story of the tournament's first half, although Novak Djokovic has been the story of the *year*. Nonetheless, so far at Wimbledon the Serbian No.2 has travelled so far under the radar that he has almost been burrowing through the turf, apparently gaining an antipathy for the fabled mole people in the process. Consequently, the only headline he has gained this week was when he snapped mid-match, and sought to demolish their tiny kingdom with his racquet. Warring upon the mole people is an immediate code violation.

The conglomerate of mental defects otherwise known as the Australian sports media has been making hay with the news that Tomic and Djokovic hit up together a few times of late. Thus we learn that the young Australian will face his 'good friend' on Court One tonight. It is hard to blame them for getting so excited, though doing so is still worth the effort. During Tomic's very accomplished dismissal of Xavier Malisse in the fourth round, Todd Woodbridge apologised at one point for playfully wishing ill-luck upon the Belgian, whereupon John Newcombe admonished his younger

colleague. The real issue, by Newk's reckoning, was that Woodbridge had pulled up shy of wishing Malisse actual physical harm, or using a genuine voodoo doll.

Anyway, expect Djokovic to see off his new bestest friend in straight sets. Tomic has performed magnificently, and may again tonight, but he is about to encounter the player of the year, relentlessly intense, liquid quick and utterly unshakeable. That is, unless the mole people retaliate.

Little Points Unnumbered

Wimbledon, Quarterfinals

(12) Tsonga d. (3) Federer, 3/6 6/7 6/4 6/4 6/4

In previewing today's quarterfinal between Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Roger Federer, I suggested that the result would hinge on Federer's assertiveness at the big moments. Would he go after the break points? How forthright would he be in consolidating breaks, or serving out sets? It was, I maintain, a reasonable enough point to make. Unfortunately, for my waning renown as a pundit and for Federer's chances of winning, it ultimately didn't matter much either way. From two sets to love up, the big moments were all Tsonga's, and Federer hardly had any chance at all.

The statistics tell a story, but, as ever, it isn't the right one. Federer hit something like 56 winners, and only 11 unforced errors. He served at over 70%, hit a bunch of aces, and won more points than his opponent. By that token, you would have to say he played an impeccable match, and I suppose, arguably, he did. It certainly felt very clean, and he dispatched anything loose with the utmost severity. Unforced errors were indeed rare, even allowing for the absurd leniency Wimbledon has shown in this regard. The real story, as ever, lies in the *forced* errors, an amorphous category that is now kept hidden from the public's easily-bewildered eye.

Unforced errors mostly tell a tale of opportunities wasted, while forced errors, among other things, yield a tale of opportunities not created. It's a nebulous distinction, undeniably, and the subtleties involved are part of the reason viewers are carefully shielded from such stats. However, matches such as today's demonstrate that the

stats they *do* show can be woefully misleading. 11 unforced errors in five sets . . . Federer hardly posted numbers like that in winning majors. But what he did do, and what he and Nadal still do better than almost anyone, is to create something from those half chances. In their hands, a forced error becomes an opportunity. And that is what Federer didn't do today, though it would be churlish to blame him. Time and again, Tsonga's shots proved too big, too unrelenting, and too well directed. Federer committed so few unforced errors because there were so few moments, especially in the last three sets, at which we was not being forced. It is to Tsonga's credit that he did not relent for a second. He was magnificent in his composure, and his unassailable aggression on the uncounted little points ensured that those big points never came round. After breaking at the beginning of the match, Federer did not earn another break point.

Similarly, it would be unfair to Tsonga to suggest Federer played poorly to be broken in each of the last three sets. If there was any let down it was momentary, and limited to a single fluffed volley, or perhaps a double fault. Otherwise, most of Federer's service games were close to perfect, served out to love, and over in less time than it takes Nadal to extract his underwear. I suggested yesterday that Tsonga, being French, is obliged to throw in one crap game per set, and for the first couple of sets he appeared determined to prove me right, although he saved his worst for the second set tiebreak, when Federer was majestic. But thereafter Tsonga set about neatly inverting my snidery. He played no bad games thereafter - *not one* - and unleashed a single truly phenomenal return game each set, punctuated with several wholly gratuitous one-handed backhanded passes, and at least one break point on which a determined Federer was simply hit off the court.

In the end, as the Frenchman served out the match effortlessly, at love, it proved a testament to his dashing and fabulous performance that the Centre Court roar was wholly approving, and not, as it often is when Federer bows out, tinged with valediction. Federer is loved everywhere, obviously, but so is Tsonga, for his gusto and ebullience, for his uncomplicated smile, and for the utterly unselfconscious way he celebrates victory, twirling and skipping across the court like an eight year old. Federer waited while the beaming Frenchman gathered his kit, and the two men walked off together.

The More Things Stay the Same

Wimbledon, Semifinals

The Final Four

The Earth having made its way around the Sun precisely once since the Wimbledon semifinals were last contested, we may safely declare that a year has passed. And yet, in both senses, it seems we've travelled nowhere at all. For the fifth consecutive time, at least three of the Big Four round out the semifinals of a major, as though this is a structural requirement of the sport, one which has little to do with how the regular tour plays out. In between the Australian and French Opens, Novak Djokovic went on a spree, and Andy Murray went on a colossal failure-bender, and yet there they both were in Paris. Since then, Murray took Queens and Djokovic took a holiday. Again, here we are.

As with last year's Wimbledon, Roger Federer is the man missing, again succumbing to a big hitter on the tear of his life. Murray must again manufacture a way past Rafael Nadal, and Djokovic will face this year's wildcard in Jo-Wilfried Tsonga (last year it was Tomas Berdych), having seen off the surprise quarterfinalist (this year Bernard Tomic, last year Yen-Hsun Lu).⁶ Talk about déjà vu all over again.

In the entirely likely event that Nadal claims the title once more, this year's Wimbledon will prove about as memorable as the last, which is to say, not especially. Naturally, that will depend on how the world No.1 navigates the next two rounds. For whatever reason, I suspect he'll have a rather harder time of it against Murray this time around, and that whoever he meets in the final will put up more resistance than Berdych did last year, which is to say, some. The main thing is that the injury to his foot, which could not be medically verified and which has not impeded his performance at all, continues to play no part, beyond sustaining that whole ultimate warrior vibe he likes to have going.

⁶As I read back over these sentences, I note that Tomas Berdych and Bernard Tomic sound like a casual spoonerism, leading me to the idea that one is in many ways the inverse of the other, at least in terms of technique and overall approach. But then I groaningly recall either player's interviews, wherein both are as engaging as a railway sleeper. In their defence, Tomic is suffering from that form of high-functioning autism commonly referred to as adolescence, whilst Berdych is an android.

On the other hand, if Nadal doesn't win, Wimbledon 2011 could well prove memorable - indeed, historic - for any number of reasons. Firstly, Djokovic would gain the top ranking for the first time, even if loses his next match. This would be a big deal, since it would represent the first time since January 2004 that someone other than Nadal or Federer has held the top spot, an unprecedented stretch of seven and a half years. I suspect my children don't realise it is even possible for someone else to be ranked No.1, although my two-year-old is admittedly shaky on the entire concept, and scores poorly on the weekly exam. Djokovic's ascension would also prove that the top ranking truly reflects sustained excellence over a long period, since the Serb right now is looking the flattest he has since last October.

If Tsonga was to achieve the unthinkable, which would require two more matches playing like he did against Federer, then he would become just the third man outside the current top three to capture a major since May 2004. Yes, that's right - lest you weren't aware - of the last 28 majors to be contested, 26 have been won by Federer (14), Nadal (10), or Djokovic (2). The other two men were Marat Safin (Australian Open 2005) and Juan Martin del Potro (US Open 2009). For Tsonga, anaemic hope may find nourishment in these considerations, for both were similarly hulking fellows with utterly uncompromising approaches. Furthermore, both defeated the first and third seeds on en route to the title, and Tsonga has already seen off the third. There is also the possibility that he has more important things to think about than random stats, or even meeting Muhammad Ali, whom every writer must mention in any article on Tsonga, or face stiff fines.

If Murray wins the title, it will probably go mostly unremarked, except in Scotland where there will be muted celebrations, possibly lunch at a nice restaurant. The English, eternally generous to their northern neighbours, will probably get on board a little, offering circumspect congratulations before withdrawing graciously, and leaving the Scots to their moment. That's basically how it will play out.

Definitive Moments

Wimbledon, Semifinals

(1) Nadal d. (4) Murray

(2) Djokovic d. (12) Tsonga

I do not generally subscribe the idea of a single definitive turning point in tennis matches, and am reluctant to discuss any encounter in such terms. Fundamentally, the idea is just too pat, and cedes insufficient importance to the kaleidoscopic thatch of small points within which these so-called key moments nest. The patness derives from the *a priori* nature of casual analysis, since it is usually impossible to discern a momentum shift as it is experienced. The exceptions, such as they are, take place when no point is being played at all, which is to say, during medical timeouts or, more often, at the sit-down between sets. With all of that said, there are times when the moment is clear, even as it happens.

Until 7/5 2/1, Andy Murray was not exactly unplayable, but he was playing out of his mind, executing that special gameplan - an unrelenting assault on the lines - that he apparently reserves for Rafael Nadal and no one else. Nadal, characteristically, was hanging on, grimly, having only conceded that lone break to drop the first set, a game in which Murray had pummelled him to 0-40, before finally breaking through. As Nadal served at 1/2, 15-30, Murray launched another big return, streaking crosscourt, which Nadal could only reflex back lamely to the service line. Murray skipped around and lined up a forehand. Forced to guess, Nadal guessed wrong, and scooted to cover the vacant crosscourt. Murray, wisely, pulled the shot up the line behind his opponent, into a hectare of open court. But somehow he missed, inches. A challenge, and it was confirmed long. It would have been 15-40, double breakpoint, but it wasn't, and Nadal went on first to hold, and then to take 11 of the next 13 games.

From that forehand on, Murray was never the same. If the idea of a defining point holds any currency, it is because tennis is a contest between fallible humans. If you believe that momentum has swung dramatic against you, then it inevitably has. Murray fell sharply away, resurged briefly but fruitlessly in the fourth, and then that was that. Afterwards Nadal was, as ever, gracious to the point of being patronising.

Everyone is well aware Murray is good enough to win a major. It's just that there are a few guys who are better at it, and he can't seem to avoid them. They're always lurking at the pointy end of the draw.

The world No.1 moves through to his fifth Wimbledon final, hoping to maintain his imposing record for another year. The No.1 ranking, however, is already gone; to the man he'll face on Sunday, the man who has already beaten him in four out of four finals this year. Nadal and Djokovic were supposed to contest the decider in Paris, an inevitable match that never happened, but they'll get their chance now, one month on.

Djokovic looked far more convincing in winning his semifinal than he had the round before, and certainly more than he did a year ago, when he lovingly handcrafted three of the poorest sets conceivable in going out to Tomas Berdych. Nonetheless, today's win over Jo-Wilfried Tsonga remained some way from the Serb's best. Tsonga, for his part, did not reprise the outrageous bravura he'd displayed in over-running an in-form Roger Federer. He was decent, don't get me wrong, but he wasn't *frightening*.

This match did not necessarily have a key point, although it boasted a myriad of terrifically entertaining ones. But if it did, it occurred at 5/4 40-40 in the first set, with Tsonga serving for the set. He fought back from 0-40, then missed his first serve. Why he then chose to fire down a 133mph second serve is a nice question, one which would doubtless produce a disarming and wholly Gallic shrug from the culprit himself. 'Did he forget it was a second serve?' wondered McEnroe in the booth. He was broken back on the next point, and went on to lose the set. It hadn't been a momentum shift as such, since Djokovic was already getting a read on the Frenchman's delivery, but it was a pretty big stuff-up.

Upon claiming that first set, Djokovic permitted himself an emotion other than dire frustration, and turned yet again to the weird tracksuit cult ensconced in his player's box - the cult of Novak. They have t-shirts. I can readily imagine every last one of them inhabiting a walled compound, working tirelessly at constructing the Interstellar Transport Vessel, before perishing tragically in an FBI siege. Anyway, having received instructions from the Planet Zarquon, they all raised their arms aloft and

shouted in unison, eyes unchanging. It happened again at the end of the match, only this time Djokovic was on his knees, bellowing contentedly.

No, and Never

Wimbledon, Final

(2) Djokovic d. (1) Nadal, 6/4 6/1 1/6 6/3

The sport's most prestigious title hung in the balance. Rafael Nadal's inevitable and ferocious counterattack had delivered him the third set 6/1, and the looming questions became if and when Novak Djokovic would succumb to doubt, and fade away. Nadal moved to an early break point in the fourth, and the answers looked to be 'yes' and 'now'. But Djokovic served his way out of that, they traded breaks, and the Serb never again looked troubled. Ultimately, the answers would prove to be 'no', and 'never', as they have all year. His, I've suggested previously, is a mind free from doubt. He is the world No.1, and he is the Wimbledon champion, accolades that have achieved synonymy in the last decade. Surely he has transcended *our* doubts as well.

Nadal was afterwards candid, and charmingly expansive, in dissecting the match, and its context within his recent troubles with Djokovic. He rightly compared it to his defeats in the American Spring, in Indian Wells and Miami, and suggested that like those encounters it hinged on Djokovic's unfettered courage at the key moments, and that he (Nadal) had been handcuffed by nerves. (Madrid and Rome, he again correctly insisted, were slightly less relevant since Djokovic had simply been so much better.) It was a frank assessment, and tellingly revealed the delicacy of Nadal's approach to these matters. Sadly, subtleties such as these are the first things ironed out by time. History will merely show that Djokovic overcame Nadal in five consecutive finals in 2011, across three different surfaces. What history says about it will depend on where they go from here.

Nadal may well cope better than expected. The standard word on the Spaniard - amply reiterated - is that he prefers the role of hunter over the hunted. It's a pretty trite word, but there's doubtless something in it. He does play freer when he is in hot

pursuit of some goal or other, be it the top ranking, or the career Grand Slam. And let's not forget that he holds the record for longest consecutive streak at No.2 (160 weeks). But that was to Roger Federer, and one suspects that playing second fiddle - if not *viola* - to Djokovic will prove rather more trying. There were moments in Madrid and Rome when Nadal looked quite disgusted to be on the bad end of the handshake, and for all that the ATP and Ion Tiriac may wish it otherwise, losing your Wimbledon title and the No.1 ranking probably hurts more.

Gaining them must feel commensurately swell, and certainly Djokovic looked thrilled. Actually, it took him a while to get to thrilled, since first he had to run through that theatrical stunned-mullet routine he unveiled in New York last year, and which this time included actually tasting the court surface, just so everyone could see how special the whole affair was. We could already tell for ourselves, since the people in his player's box switched their standard-issue white tracksuits for white t-shirts with Serbian flags on them. Word is there were wild celebrations in Belgrade. Djokovic was, as ever, gracious and proud in his acceptance speech. He really seems like a hell of a nice guy, relaxed and accessible.

He now has an enormous target embroidered onto his back, so it'll be interesting to see just how relaxed he remains once that itch settles in between his shoulder blades. I have always suspected that getting to No.1 meant more to Djokovic than it has for any player since Pete Sampras, even including Federer and Nadal, and that the years of playing third fiddle - okay, *viola* - were a bit of a downer. Now that he's achieved the top spot, and claimed the tournament he is suddenly declaring means the most, I'm curious to see how it pans out. Still, he doesn't have a ton of meaningful stuff to defend between now and the end of the year - mostly just a US Open final - so it is hard to see how he might be replaced before January 2012, especially given his outstanding abilities on the US hardcourts.

But these are concerns for other days. For now, we have a Wimbledon champion and a world No.1 who isn't Nadal or Federer, for the first time since 2002 and 2004 respectively. It has been long wait for the heir-apparent, so long that even as his streak grew to ludicrous proportions this year, as titles mounted up, there must have been a lurking anxiety that it may never come, even as it seemed inevitable to

everyone else. Well, the day has arrived, and judging from the smile, it's good to be the king.

Blasphemies and Break Outs

At an unguarded moment some days prior to The Championships just gone, the idea occurred to me that the world's most prestigious tennis tournament is not as good as it should be. I utter this *sotto voce*, the way all blasphemies are born (rehearsed coyly, but gaining boldness when neither divine nor state retribution eventuates). And I'm not concerned about the immaculate venue, or the daft coverage, or the line judge's hopelessly bland attire. I speak only of the tennis, which might well be as good as it can be, but is nothing like as good as it should be.

Ask yourself: how much better would the top players perform if Wimbledon arrived at the end of a grass season comparable with the Roland Garros lead-up, and if they hadn't transitioned from clay just weeks earlier. If we accept that even today's stately and stable grass requires specialised skills in order to flourish, then we must surely concede that a longer lead-in would see those skills honed more finely still. A week or two is not enough.

Unlike clay, which rewards that special array of strengths happily concentrated in Rafael Nadal, grass court mastery in this post-serve-volley era largely boils down to limiting its detriment on one's normal, which is to say hardcourt, game. Following that too-long clay season, there is a mad scramble to limit how thoroughly the new surface makes seasoned pros look like hackers. We might say that grass rewards variety, but it's equally if not more accurate to say that it really penalises players who cope poorly with variety, which is to say, most of them. I doubt whether Robin Soderling would have had anything like as much trouble with Bernard Tomic on an indoor hardcourt, crook gut or not. But Soderling fares ill when multiple variables are involved, and Tomic on grass was an entire asylum full of them. For Exhibits B through D, see Roger Federer, Alexandr Dolgoplov, and the wind. More play on grass might conceivably help Soderling, but it would certainly help other players

even more. What might the rankings look like if the grass and clay seasons were switched. Can you picture Philip Petzschner in the top twenty?

That said, it would probably help the top players the most of all, notwithstanding that they're on top precisely because they demonstrate year-round mastery at limiting the extent to which vagaries of surface, mood, vibe, form and location impact their games. It is perhaps a churlish point to make, given that Wimbledon has given us three all-time classic finals in the last five years. Federer on grass between 2003 and 2008 proved almost unbeatable, and what a terrible and wondrous idea it is to imagine how much better he might have been had he actually trained on it for more than a few weeks each year.

Bernard Tomic

The point is occasionally made that the Slams are so interesting due to the length of the events themselves, for the way a narrative arc can develop over two weeks in a way that it can't over one. It seems a fair enough point, until we try to recall anything that happened in the first week of just about any major in the last ten years. There was plenty that seemed momentous at the time - random recollection: Richard Fromberg's improbable run to the Australian Open fourth round in 1998 - and these tend to provoke a rapidly self-consuming media frenzy. Unless you're going 70-68 in the fifth, the improbable run must extend into the second week if it is to outpace history's eroding touch. Even then, a mighty quarterfinal might be forgotten before the decade is out. What do we retain from the 2006 Australian Open? Remember Nicolas Kiefer's heroic journey to the final four? No, me neither. I recall Marcos Baghdatis tearing the draw apart, and Federer blubbing on Rod Laver's shoulder at the trophy presentation.

That bundle of multiple variables known as Bernard Tomic reached the quarterfinals at Wimbledon this year, and pushed the eventual winner and new world No.1. He was the youngest player to progress so far since Boris Becker in 1986. But if he never goes on to greater accomplishments, almost no one will remember. We only remember that particular accolade of Becker's because he went on to defend the title, and then went on to be Boris Becker. Unless Tomic's run proves to be a breakout, it will count for little, a mere footnote, one of the dully informative ones you

gloss over. If Tomic goes on with it, and eventually reaches the heights of the men's game, then this may be remembered as a key moment. Now, as then, time will tell.

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga's first and most definitive breakout performance came at the 2008 Australian Open. His career since has seen him adhere rigorously to a timetable alternating injury with further outbreaks, and one can feel safe in assuming it will go this way until he retires. Wimbledon 2011 witnessed the latest of his peaks.

If pressed, Tsonga would doubtless choose as his highlight those three flawless sets he inflicted on Roger Federer. But for me, and apparently for others as well, the standout match was that second round tussle with Grigor Dimitrov, a fabulously skilled and sporting encounter. Had the Frenchman's form been less transcendent, there is every chance Dimitrov would have won it. Wimbledon 2011 might have been his moment, too. But it was not to be. History was all luck once, and it still is.

Davis Cup Quarterfinals

Fearsome Quartets

Davis Cup, World Group Quarterfinals

The first round of the 2011 Davis Cup World Group produced few classics, meagrely dotted throughout a weekend of lopsided ties and very piddly drama, leaving us - in lieu of satisfaction - with the vague hope that things might pick up in the quarterfinals. On paper, this next round was enticing, and added frisson arrived in the form of Albert Costa, who provoked a tempest in a teacup by challenging the USA's choice of surface. It was amply discussed at the time, which is part of the reason why I won't go back over it here. The other reason is that it was very boring even as it unfolded. Rafael Nadal chimed in with his muddled two cents. Now that he has withdrawn, his opinion on the matter matters even less than if he'd shown up, which is saying something. Spain's appeal was dismissed. Anyway . . .

Argentina v. Kazakhstan

Play commenced a day early on this one, and Argentina, at home, are already 2-0 up, for the loss of just twelve games. They'll probably lose about as many more in the next three matches. Kazakhstan, incidentally, are at full strength.

Sweden v. Serbia

Serbia has sensibly gone in with the same team that captured the Davis Cup final last November, spearheaded by the ex-world No.3 and reigning Belgrade champion Novak Djokovic. Sweden were not so lucky in their choice of personnel, fielding a fearsome quartet that includes Michael Ryderstedt and Ervin Eleskovic, who are not household names even in Sweden, though they might conceivably be within their own households. They have the home court advantage, however, which might see them each gain a game or two from Djokovic, if he's feeling charitable.

USA v. Spain

Nadal's decision not to play this tie has naturally swung favouritism back the American's way, given that they outrank their opponents on aggregate, the Bryan

Brothers have just captured their 11th major doubles title, it will go down in Austin, Texas, and both Mardy Fish and Andy Roddick may well play in abbreviated socks. Gratuitous displays of pale ankle are to world tennis as the *haka* is to Rugby. Much has been made of the fact that both Lopez and Fish reached the Wimbledon quarterfinals last week. However, I expect the pivotal player to be David Ferrer. While he is the highest ranked participant in the entire tie - No.6 - he is also the least fearsome on very fast hardcourts, but also the most tenacious on any surface. It's worth noting that Fernando Verdasco's last match on this surface was the San Jose final back in February, where he famously lost to Milos Raonic in the final, inspiring a calamitous decline that we are yet to see run its course. He has been picked for the doubles, to partner Lopez.

Germany v. France

This is shaping up to be the most fascinating tie of the round, and arguably the hardest to pick. Tight-rope talent abounds, and the capacity for utter mental collapse will be virtually unparalleled, with Monfils, Kohlschreiber and Gasquet all in action on day one. Even with Jo-Wilfried Tsonga relegated to doubles, the French look to be the favourites on paper, holding a clear rankings advantage. On clay, though? It isn't the most convincing choice of surface. It may blunt Gasquet's shotmaking, but it will certainly do the same to Kohlschreiber's, who will have a bastard of a time trying to get anything past Gael Monfils. Monfils will predictably lurk ten yards shy of the baseline, in order to ratchet up the degree-of-difficulty on all his groundstrokes, one of the clever tactics he employs to avoid winning matches comfortably. Much weirdness, and I haven't even mentioned Florian Mayer, who post-Santoro has really owned the term. The doubles will be pivotal, and will depend on either Petzschner or Llodra stepping up, on a surface apparently chosen to negate both their games.

On Paper...

Davis Cup, World Group Quarterfinals

In the end, it all worked out more or less as expected, although sadly not as hoped-for. On paper, it appeared as though the Davis Cup World Group quarterfinals *might* produce some tight and exciting ties, in much the same way the previous round

mostly hadn't. So much for on paper, which doesn't know as much about tennis as it thinks it does.

Then again, you didn't need to know much to predict that both Serbia and Argentina would amble through unscathed, and that if a rubber was going to be dropped, it would mostly likely be in the doubles, which in this era of 'doubles-specialists' - the red-headed violists of the pro circuit - can make the middle day a veritable crap shoot. Your team might feature the Bryan brothers, but if you're faced with, say, Federer and Wawrinka, you can quickly discover that even the most accomplished combination only flourishes by the grace of a packed singles season. Think back to Indian Wells, when the singles players opted *in*. Nevertheless, the Bryans this weekend only had to face Verdasco and Lopez - who are not 'specialists' but *are* 'special' - while the Swiss pair managed to drop a set in seeing off a gallant Portugal. But I'm getting ahead of myself, and I don't mean to belittle the ever-dependable Bryans, around whom the USA's entire Davis Cup effort is justifiably based, regardless of what a fading Andy Roddick might still believe.

That the USA went down to Spain on a slick indoor court in Austin tells you that a rock-solid doubles combination is not enough, which I suppose we all knew anyway. At some point, your star singles players - both in the top ten - will have to put up. As it was, Fish and Lopez ground out a flaccid five-setter that was nothing like as epic as the scoreline suggests (8-6 in the fifth to the Spaniard), while Roddick managed to blow about 78 set points against David Ferrer, and then, from a set down, he treated the remainder of the match as a very long coda. His two double-faults to end were a nice touch, both a double-bar line and a sly nod to Ferrer's overall efficacy on return. At least, I think that's what he was getting at. I had suggested coming in to this tie that Ferrer was the joker in the pack here, and that it would be his performance that would largely determine the outcome. It did, so that's nice for him, and for me. It is Spain's first Davis Cup victory on US soil since about 1972, or something, and they did it without Nadal. They will next face France, and if the Austin surface probed the upper edge of permissible speeds, and then the molasses the Spanish will inflict on the French might strain belief.

In other news, word came through some days ago that Gael Monfils has split with Roger Rasheed, which perhaps explains why he looked so decisive on court against

the Germans. Even more astoundingly, there are reports that Rasheed has already hooked up with Andy Murray. Now there's a contrast, between the ghost-white, lanky and straight-talking Scot and the outstandingly bicepped and bronzed Australian, who so bewitches us with his neologistic pep-speak at any opportunity. Whatever his other faults, Murray is fairly no-nonsense, and Rasheed, if his commentary is anything to go by, talks nothing but. Something might go haywire in translation, which is about the last thing the Scot needs.

The US Summer (August – September)

This Mighty Quartet

There is a case to be made that there is no such thing as the Big Four. Those opposed to the idea correctly point out that Andy Murray has never won a major, and therefore does not merit inclusion in any assembly so august as to feature Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic. It's a fair point, and if the criteria for membership in this purely theoretical club included a proven capacity to bag Grand Slams, then the naysayers' nays would be hard to gainsay.

But insofar as the Big Four means anything at all - and it *is* largely a mirage - its coherence derives from the capacity to behave as a unit, one that makes less sense without Andy Murray included. The top three win just about everything, it's true, but the top four not only win everything, but disqualify anyone else from even getting close. So like all imagined communities, it is defined by what it excludes, which in this case is just about everyone. These considerations are particularly relevant right now, having just witnessed a twelve month stretch in which the top four's dominance is utterly unprecedented, and as we move to the North American hardcourts, a surface upon which none of the four are at their worst, and some are at their best.

In the last 12 months, there have been 14 significant tournaments contested (excluding Davis Cup, a special case). These have comprised four majors, nine Masters 1000 events, and the World Tour Finals. For top players, these comprise the compulsory parts of the season, the events to which they must turn up, or otherwise risk fines, forgo prestige and miss out on the big points hauls. The Big Four turned up at 12 of these 14 events, with Nadal missing the Paris Indoors, and Djokovic opting out of Monte Carlo. In all but one case (Cincinnati 2010), at least three of them made it to semifinals, and in every case, one of the four claimed the event. The only notable tournament that they did not win in the period was the Paris Indoors, which was won by Robin Soderling, ranked No.5. To those who suggest that Djokovic's domination this season has skewed the figures, consider that had he lost all of his finals, he would merely have lost to Nadal or Murray. The trophy in each case would have remained in the club.

To adjust the perspective slightly: across all of these events, there have been a total of 56 semifinal spots available (14 x 4), and only 16 times did a player not of the top four progress that far. Of these 16 occasions, the only players to progress past the quarterfinals more than once were David Ferrer (who managed it at the Australian Open and at the Monte Carlo Masters, where Djokovic did not play) and Mardy Fish (semifinals in Miami, and the final in Cincinnati). In other words, in an entire year only 16 semifinal berths have been made available to the rest of the tour, which is astounding in itself, and only becomes more so when we consider that Murray's abject failure in the American Spring freed up two of those spots (Indian Wells and Miami 2011), whilst another two were opened up when Nadal didn't play Bercy, and Djokovic didn't play Monaco.

As a period of domination goes, I suspect it is without precedent. Here are some numbers to back that up. As far as I can make out, these 14 events provide a sum total of 93,300 points (not including qualifying), of which a maximum of 18,500 is available to any single player (that is how many you would receive if you won every event). The theoretical maximum that a group of four players can hold at once is 42,740 (if they all reach at least the semifinals in every event). In the last 12 months, the top four accrued 37,080 points, which is about 86.76% of the theoretical limit. It is hard to overestimate just how impressive this is. In order to demonstrate it, let's compare it against year-end data for the last 21 seasons (back to 1990), with point values adjusted to reflect current ranking points:



The spike in 1995, incidentally, reflected a very strong year for Sampras, Agassi, Muster and Becker, and the subsequent nosedive reflects the precipitous slumps experienced by some of those players. We can also see how profoundly the percentage lifted in 2007, when Djokovic joined the elite. That being said, the current level is over 12% higher than at any other time in the last 20 years.

On that note, the odds are 5/1 that all four will reach the semifinals of the US Open, and 9/4 that they will between them collect the next five majors. That sounds about right.

Don't Bet On It

Hamburg, First Round

Kohlschreiber d. Golubev, 7/5 6/3

Here in Melbourne, there is at present a frightful kerfuffle concerning Australian Rules Football and betting. Whether you care for the game or not, it is impossible not to be exposed to it, since the news networks have taken to broadcasting updates directly into our brains. As far as I can make out, one player made an exotic wager of \$10, and has had his hand cut off. Another player mentioned to his brother-in-law that he'd be starting in a different position in a coming match, whereupon said relation scurried off and placed a small bet based on this astounding piece of intel. The offending player was forced to watch while the family farm was razed, and the land salted. Or something.

Level heads are right in wondering whether the presiding body's puritanical tut-tutting is somewhat hypocritical, given that advertising for betting sites underpins every telecast, and takes pride of place on the hoardings at the games themselves. To the screeched query of *'Will no one think of the children?'* one might respond that the advertisers have certainly given them a great deal of thought. The part of the AFL managing sponsorships probably thinks of them, too.

Being a tennis fan, I am mercifully excused from having to worry about any of this. The ATP is adamant that shady goings-on and match-fixing are *not* endemic. Colour me reassured. And so it was with a pristine conscience that I hunkered down to watch the Bet-At-Home Open from Hamburg - streamed via the Bet365 website - to see defending champion Andrei Golubev swept away in a whirlwind of sustained recklessness. There was nothing untoward about the result, I hasten to add, except that it was a rare example of Philipp Kohlschreiber being the most prudent and cautious player involved. Golubev hits the ball wonderfully, though his 2-25 record for the year proves that wonderful ball hitting is not enough. He will now depart the top 100.

Atlanta, First Round

Blake d. Gulbis, 5/7 7/6 6/2

Meanwhile over on a rival continent, the American summer series has officially begun, though we remain several weeks away from having to care very much, unless you are American. I am not American, and one of the many benefits this confers is that I therefore can't be accused of being un-American. Being un-Australian is sufficiently exhausting. The upshot is that I don't have to get too excited that James Blake beat Ernests Gulbis last night in Atlanta, nor that he'll be facing John Isner next. Two Americans in the second round of Atlanta? We mustn't get ahead of ourselves, but pencil both in for the US Open final. Gulbis, for the record, served for the match, moved to 30-0, and then Blake adjusted his tactics, from hitting the ball as hard as he can to hitting the ball *in* as hard as he can. A minor adjustment, it's true, but it highlights where he's been going wrong of late. Was it entertaining? Of course it was.

Realistically, in being positioned so far out from the US Open, the Atlanta Tennis Championships is destined to showcase local talent and little else, perhaps momentarily diverting fans from the allegedly dire straits in which American tennis finds itself. (They only have two players in the top ten. As an Australian, I can really sympathise.) There are approximately 158 other Americans in the main draw this week, so the odds are good that one of them will take it. If only there was some way to place a bet.

The Passing of an Era

Hamburg, Quarterfinals

(8) Verdasco d. (2) Melzer, 6/3 2/6 6/4

(3) Almagro d. (6) Mayer, 7/6 7/6

If you're after a good laugh - and can't bring yourself to watch any more of the Bryan Brothers' music clips - then you could do worse than head over to Fernando Verdasco's official website. Let's just say that an atmosphere of virulent machismo prevails, delivered via the miracle of Flash. The intro - plenty of guff about 'no matter the opponent, no matter the surface...' and macho poses struck whilst bursting through the surface of Rod Laver Arena - establishes a myth-making tone that is effortlessly sustained throughout. His ranking has since dipped to a modest 22, so there's rich irony too, presumably unintended. The more profound irony, however, is that as far as I can tell Verdasco is actually quite likable in person. In interviews he is thoughtful and gracious. Sadly, his projected image as the world's hottest specimen leaves any such depths unexplored, content to splash in the shallows. Naturally it makes him an easy target for derision, although the hordes of screeching and gasping girls dogging his every appearance - I've seen them; I could say it wasn't pretty, but I'd be lying - suggest there are worse images to project.

Then again, when all else fails, there was always that hairstyle . . . Even if Verdasco was to become Mother Teresa overnight, we would still have that to poke fun at, a towering and moist thatch from which to make comedic hay. His hair helmet was my rock. You might thus appreciate the dismay I felt upon tuning into the Hamburg quarterfinal against Jurgen Melzer, and discovering that he has shaved his head. The faux-mo is no mo'. And he remains absurdly handsome. Furthermore, he has finally forsaken the hideous adidas kit he maintained for the season's first half, even as other players in that stable had gleefully moved on. Today, he looked downright classical in blue shorts and a simple white t-shirt. Unfortunately, he also looked quite a lot like his opponent, who is similarly left-handed, thus presenting casual viewers with a confusing spectacle, unless they're teenage girls, who can discern Verdasco from a thousand yards. Actually, I can imagine a moment's consternation in the

locker room prior to the ball, as the belles discovered they'd turned up in matching gowns, the only difference being that the Austrian wore a blue cap and white shoes, and the Spaniard's colours were reversed.

Happily, they proved similarly matched on court. The first two sets were split evenly, and the tennis was excellent. It was Melzer that looked to have the momentum in the third, with a clutch of break points early in the set, before the pair traded actual breaks. The Austrian lost his serve again, somehow, but again looked set to break back. There was a controversial line call at 15-30 that got the crowd involved, but it went Verdasco's way. He served it out, Melzer was disgusted, and that was that. The crowd were rather more involved when Almagro later overcame Florian Mayer, incensed by the Spaniard's tendency to trade barbs with them, and to bellow '*Vamos!*' on Mayer's errors. Verdasco and Almagro will meet in the semifinals, and it's no task at all to predict which man the crowd will favour, even those who aren't fifteen and female.

A Final Mix Up

Hamburg, Final

(5) Simon d. (3) Almagro, 6/4 4/6 6/4

Somewhere between the week that was and the finals that weren't, the finals that should have been were misplaced. The surprisingly enjoyable German Open taught us that second tier Europeans will stick flock to a clay court tournament of sufficient pedigree, and also that when placing bets we need not forsake the comforts of home. It deserved an exciting finale. Alas, it didn't get one.

Following Nicolas Almagro's quite remarkable run through February's optimistically named Golden Swing, I suggested that he really needed to prove himself on European clay, where it matters. It turns out there are two European clay courts where it doesn't matter much - Nice and Hamburg - and so he's done quite well on those. I stand corrected, or at any rate amended. Actually, after last night's final, I mostly stand disappointed that the Spaniard's form should vanish so abruptly. He was fearsome a day earlier against Fernando Verdasco, cruelly denying me any

number of hearty puns on the term 'close shave'. Today, faced with the redoubtably scruffy and waif-like Gilles Simon, he looked overwhelmed. They gave Simon a retro desk fan, but never explained why.

Atlanta, Final

(1) Fish d. (3) Isner, 3/6 7/6 6/2

Meanwhile, in Atlanta, the week proved as dull as it was foregone. Mardy Fish has defended his title, though it was run as close as these things can be. He saved match points. Somehow he rallied back from a set down, and then a break down, and then 1-5 down in the tiebreak. Then Isner's match points came and went. It was terrifically exciting, a final truly worthy of . . . Hamburg.

Really, the victor was American tennis, as it invariably is at this moment in the season, a triumphant procession through numerous 250s before the very important Europeans swan in over the coming weeks. Los Angeles is the next stop, where Fish is No.1 seed. A couple of not-so-important Europeans in Tommy Haas and Grigor Dimitrov will meet in the first round, hopefully one to savour. Dimitrov remains at the very beginning of his career as the next big thing, and a glance across the net will demonstrate that that particular phase of a career need not end, ever. You can be the next big think until you retire. Somewhere along the line, against all likelihood, Haas has made peace with this, and so it is good to have him back.

Here We Are

Los Angeles, Second Round

Through no fault of mine, the US Open Series gathers momentum, or more accurately mass, with the consequent increase in gravity drawing in more and more high-quality protagonists from elsewhere in the cosmos. Some are even European, although the bulk of those continue to pursue ludicrous silverware in such renowned hotspots as Umag and Gstaad, and the very best remain walled-off in their pleasure palaces. It follows that those in LA are not the very best.

Which brings us to Ernests Gulbis, who for the first time since Nice has strung together enough wins that it can now be considered a trend: two. He's *trending*. He next faces Juan Martin del Potro, so it's doubtful the practice will become habit forming. Del Potro saw off James Blake in a pretty entertaining night match, the kind of match that Blake's fans gravely profess to find encouraging, since it apparently betokens good things to come. They will continue to feel this way until the very end, which Blake continues to insist he hasn't considered, whilst somehow maintaining a straight face.

As for fans of del Potro, the interminable gestation is complete, and the hour of full rebirth at hand. Since his tour return in January - recall that initial agonising marathon with Feliciano Lopez, gravid with promise - the sanctioned view has been that it didn't matter how well their hero played, since his comeback was such a long-term project. It was unreasonable to expect anything until the US Summer. 'US Summer' rapidly became a mantra, and the lustiness with which it was chanted neither swelled nor diminished with each triumph or failure, remaining as childishly on-message as the political advertising aimed at swinging voters. The titles gained along the way were nice, but they were merely gravy, as inconsequential as the losses, which have been few.

Well, here we are. Time to put up.

All Fun and Games

Los Angeles, Semifinal

Gulbis d. Bogomolov Jr., 6/2 7/6

Thanks to Oscar Wilde and the apparently irresistible nature of puns, Ernests Gulbis' early career has been dogged by pedestrian wordplay in near-lockstep with his varied results. When Federer avenged a prior loss to the Latvian in Madrid last year, the headline predictably ran 'The Importance of Beating Ernests'. No one saw that coming. At some point during Gulbis' current Grand Slam streak - something like 21 consecutive dropped sets going back to Wimbledon 2009 - we were treated to 'The Impotence of Bleating Ernests'. More creative, perhaps, but equally trite, for it adds

little, and evokes nothing of the original title's effervescence, nor its deft play of meaning. As with most punning headlines, the composing of which is a dying art that had little life to begin with, a facile delight in the similarity of phrasing is deemed a sufficient end in itself.

Anyway, context: Gulbis has pushed through to the final in Los Angeles. Even as the final point was played, I started to imagine what the Wildean headline might be if he takes the title, but quickly gave up. Why expend the effort, when so many geniuses will inevitably bring their considerable wit to bear? This isn't to say that dull puns don't leap to my mind as readily as they do to anyone else's. To the contrary, bad writing is the starting point for all writers - only the most conceited or lucky contend otherwise - but it is only for bad writers that it remains the end. The trick is to see the bad ideas as bad, and the dull ideas as dross, to discard what cannot be saved, and then work on the few useful nuggets that remain. Even then, the common mistake is to imagine that any nuggets left in the sieve are therefore gold. They almost never are, and so working on them requires less polishing than it does chipping and laborious grinding.

That's the other thing about bad phrases. They rarely give themselves away by being too simple, but by being too ornate. The most irritating writers of all are those who fancy themselves stylists, at their most cringeworthy when verbiage leads them into the kind of metaphorical trap in which intended meaning is inverted or destroyed. Take this humdinger from Tennis.com: 'You didn't need to see the swooping fire graphic on the back of Nadal's shirt to feel the heat he brought in extinguishing American qualifier Ryan Sweeting.' If extinguishing was Nadal's intention, you'd imagine more heat was the last thing he would bring to bear, yet the writer seems to be implying that the ideal tool for putting out fires is a flame-thrower. How about this one, from the same writer on the same site: 'It was born as a pizza cutter with training wheels and has evolved into a slice of gear ingenuity, complete with its own commercial catch-phrase topping.' There is a metaphorical thread here, but it is snapped when the pizza-cutter somehow evolves into a slice of pizza, while the ending - 'commercial catch-phrase topping' - is so contrived that it actually sounds like a parody of bad writing. The possible reasons why this made it to 'print' are both quite depressing. Either the writer noted it, and due to a looming deadline or laziness

decided it didn't matter, which from a professional writer is frankly not best practice. Worse still is the possibility that he simply didn't notice.

One last example, since I cannot resist: 'He appeared more the introverted, slump-shouldered carpenter's helper, resigned [to] this task on a hot summer afternoon—at least until it came time to assert himself on the court and blast forehands and aces as if he were swinging not a racket but a nail gun.' The passage, which concerns Juan Martin del Potro, had me until he started to wave that nail gun about. I'm pretty sure that's doing it wrong. Furthermore, I assume carpentry apprentices still use hammers, which as a metaphorical tool would have worked perfectly well (if a tad clichéd). Instead he tried to get fancy, and we have del Potro spraying nails everywhere, an apt reminder that metaphors are all fun and games until someone loses an eye.

The Art of Understatement

Gstaad, Final

Granollers d. Verdasco, 6/4 3/6 6/3

Hands up who remembers that American Express ad from some years back, the one in which Andy Roddick stoically endures those side-splitting situations that arise when you transport your winner's trophies via commercial passenger jet? At one point Roddick blocks the aisle with an oversized novelty cheque, then the in-flight movie with some silverware that dwarfs the Queens trophy in scale and design. It's all very relatable. The most 'hilarious' moment comes when the overhead locker springs open, and a trophy lands on his head, which next to 'groin' and 'awards ceremony' is the most hilarious place to be hit by a trophy. While the ad is intended to be funny, to modern eyes the comedy owes less to the amply-explored sub-genre of large things getting in the way, than to the patent absurdity of Andy Roddick winning enough events that this could be a problem. It's been many years since that's been an issue, which rather dates the piece.

Even so, this ad is never far from my mind during the European indoor swing, which for aficionados of ludicrous trophies is considered high season. How do the titlists

get these things on the plane? I can only imagine the disappointment that would ensue for player awarded a trophy shaped like a pair of giant nail-scissors. Try getting that through security. Given the apparent flimsiness of the overhead compartments, Roddick appears fortunate not to have won more in Europe. Certainly it's a good thing he never won Gstaad. Marcel Granollers just did, and has been rewarded with the opportunity to have his skull caved in on the flight home. He saw off Fernando Verdasco in the final, consigning the senior Spaniard to a paltry 0-3 record in finals this year, and 5-11 for his career. Still, there are worse finals to lose than Gstaad. We might say Verdasco dodged a bullet, except that it was clearly ammunition for a catapult.

On the subject of obscene trophies, Alexandr Dolgoplov earned the first of his career in Umag. I don't know if he packed appropriate luggage, although he was thoughtful in coordinating his outfit.

The Stories They Won't Tell

Washington, Second Round

Blake d. (8) Nalbandian, 6/2 6/4

In the dew-smeared eyes of the sadly uninitiated, it probably seems as though the last decade of men's tennis belonged to Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

Champions, both, and champions define the limits of normal history. Ho-hum. This is the truest truism we have. But within that chasm separating the past and history, which is to say life and narrative, flows the vast hidden mass of other histories. The conceit of modern scholarship is to value these histories equally, presuming every life vouchsafes an invaluable glimpse into the time through which it passes, but the truth is that the deeper you go, the more forgettable it gets. Peer just below the choppy surface, however, and things remain pretty interesting.

A perverse history of men's tennis in the last ten years might wilfully omit Federer and Nadal, but it would still be fascinating if it gave us Nalbandian, Blake, Haas and Gonzalez. It might even be better for it. The players themselves might even wish it had actually played out that way, but that is past, and only history can be changed.

All four are or were at their toils in Washington this week, evoking sepia-tinted heydays. Gonzalez and Haas have apparently played several times since their utterly non-epic Australian Open semifinal in 2007, but I don't remember it. It was a rematch for me, a delayed chance at redress. But then the Chilean had to withdraw for a hip replacement or something, and so fed the unlucky loser Amir Delic to Haas.

Blake versus Nalbandian *was* a rematch, a twisted echo down the ages. Veterans each, and their combined comeback tally numbers in the teens, but somehow the last time they met was the first. It was Shanghai 2006, in the semifinals of the Masters Cup, with Nalbandian as defending champion. Federer and Nadal played out a staggering first semifinal, one of the finest displays of tennis ever witnessed. Blake and Nalbandian had to cap it, somehow. They didn't, but that's what the secret history will say. Blake allowed the Argentine just five games. He used to be *that* good. Today, half the world and half a decade away, with their aggregate ranking clearing triple figures, Nalbandian won six games. That's *progress*. He was again the defending champion. He has never defended a title. They are now sufficiently venerated that strong performances can be called vintage. Today Blake gave a vintage performance. More grist for the narrative, the stories they won't tell.

Compromising

Washington, Third Round

Isner d. Blake, 7/6 1/6 7/6

'Blake actually went for the winner . . . I'm surprised he did that.' It's hard to imagine any commentator in the last ten years uttering these words with a straight face, but today one did. If there's one thing to know about James Blake, it's that actually going for the winner is actually his thing. It will be chiselled into his tombstone. Those of a generous disposition call it 'uncompromising', which used not to be a compliment, but now is, a sign of the times.

The moment when he actually went for the winner and so startled that single booth-jockey came in the third set, at 3/3. He'd fought back from 1/3 down, and moved to break point. Isner missed his first serve, which returners of his serve agree is a key

step towards breaking him. The second serve was kicked to the backhand, but with little width or viciousness. Blake had a clear play, so he actually went for the winner - a backhand drive up the line. Needless to say, he missed.

It was not his last chance, although the rest would be compromised, uncharacteristically. The next opportunity came with Isner serving at 5/5 0-30. He launched an ace, close to the service line. Blake looked askance at the line, then at the umpire, but didn't challenge. The replay showed it long. It would merely have meant a second serve, but it would have usefully capped a little passage in which Isner had grown progressively more preoccupied with Hawkeye. Half-convinced that even the technology was against him - Hawkeye in these moments comes to stand in for the broader cosmos - seeing that ace overruled might well have propelled him over the edge. There's no way of knowing why Blake didn't challenge, but it seems to me that players are generally less inclined to when facing friends, and he and Isner are close. It's a theory. It's a compromise.

Two weeks ago in Atlanta this pair was cruising to a third set breaker, when Isner abbreviated proceedings by breaking and winning. Today they made the tiebreak. Everything purred along on serve, though for a wonder it was Isner pressing the issue off the ground, and lumbering forward. Blake flicked a running backhand pass, Federer-like, but he should never have been on the run. Then Isner really attacked, and Blake permitted him to. The match ended with a flurry of put-away volleys, and a very fine overhead off a swirling floater.

I discovered in that final tiebreak that I would prefer Blake to win, which I hadn't realised earlier. It probably hadn't been the case until that moment, the moment familiar to all sports fans, when professed indifference gives way preference, born of the urge to care about the outcome, one way or another.

Luck of the Draw: Montreal 2011

The Montreal Masters draw has been released, and as usual bad vibrations are thrumming the ether: it's all rigged, and your favourite player has the toughest draw since the Challenge Round was abolished, which as I understand it required William

Renshaw to battle seven top opponents simultaneously, who would periodically combine into a Voltron-like mega-robot. My grasp of the details might be shaky, but I think I have the fundamental concept right. Anyway, you know the drill. Winning will be a tough out.

So let's save some time. Federer and Djokovic again share a half, as do Nadal and Murray. This happens a lot, and the odds on it happening so often are small. Three things to bear in mind:

1. The odds on it happening are not zero.
2. It didn't happen in Miami, Madrid or Rome.
3. Let it go.

Moving on, who has the toughest draw out of the top four? Djokovic. Will someone from outside the top four win the event? Probably not, given that all four are playing, which is the sole precondition of one of them winning a Masters event (especially in Canada, where they've shared the last *seven* titles). I suppose Soderling won the Paris Indoors last year, but Nadal didn't turn up. Soderling hasn't turned up in Montreal, so winning this one might be a long shot. Ferrer, Roddick and Melzer are also no-shows. Curiously, the draw looks no leaner for their absence, which I don't mean as an insult. Anyway, who *will* win? I don't know. Andy Murray is the two-time defending champion. Maybe him. Maybe not.

As for the rest, there are enticing first round matchups littered throughout. Gulbis should beat Ferrero, but only if he retains his form from Los Angeles, so pencil Ferrero in for that one. Nalbandian versus Wawrinka will almost certainly prove disappointing, a succinct demonstration that good players out of form are indistinguishable from bad players. Granted a wildcard, Bernard Tomic will face a qualifier first up. For his own good, he should have *been* a qualifier. Wimbledon proved that. For shot making, try Haas and Tipsarevic; for short points at either extreme of the sex-bomb scale, try Stepanek and Lopez; for tight-rope flair and near-certain mental collapse, you could do worse than Gasquet and Mayer. Or better.

Deuced Flat

Washington, Final

Stepanek d. (1) Monfils, 6/4 6/4

Radek Stepanek today defeated Gael Monfils in straight sets in the Washington final, a putative upset that has been widely attributed to the vagaries of scheduling, as though a poor Monfils performance requires any explication from external sources. He looked deuced flat, make no mistake, but some regard the lithe Frenchman as the greatest pure athlete the sport has yet witnessed, and it isn't as though a night match with John Isner saps one's stamina to quite the degree that an extended tussle with, say, Novak Djokovic would. There were also a couple of lengthy and restful rain delays, which allowed viewers to revisit the quarterfinals from the day before, in case we hadn't yet tired of the commentators mangling Victor Troicki's name: *Trow-eeeki*. The semifinal had ended late, but it was hardly the turn-around demanded by the US Open's allegedly Super Saturday.

It's more accurate - if less helpful - to say that Monfils played badly for the same reason he usually does, which is to say no reason. These performances generally occur out of nowhere, usually signalling the end of an upward trend in his form, a *subito piano* at the peak of a *crescendo*. Think back to last year's US Open, when an imposing passage through the early rounds counted for nothing against Djokovic in the quarterfinals, a match in which Monfils barely seemed to be playing tennis at all. Frequently the *crescendo* carries him to a final, but rarely further. His record in finals is now a dismal 3-11. There's an issue here.

Stepanek's finals record is now a more respectable 5-7. Today's victory has neatly halved his ranking to 27, which means that he will be seeded for the US Open. This will be a relief for him, but an even greater relief for the other seeds. A wily veteran on a fast hardcourt, Stepanek is a truly unattractive prospect in the early rounds.

The Big Flaw

Montreal Masters, Second Round

Anderson d. (4) Murray, 6/3 6/1

Kevin Anderson today defeated two-time defending champion Andy Murray in two astonishingly straight sets. It was clearly the upset of the day, although it may not rank in the top five for the year, even for Murray. Anderson is several classes above Donald Young and Alex Bogomolov, and today he played well. Still, it was upsetting enough, and the world No.4 will shed nearly a thousand points, which might have seen his ranking threatened had either Soderling or Ferrer turned up. They haven't, so he's safe for now.

Anderson performed strongly, imposing and probing, and for a man of his height he is surprisingly mobile, a trait that was widely lauded after his gallant loss to Djokovic in Miami. The lopsided scoreline might conceivably inspire the assumption that Anderson's serve was impregnable, and certainly the combination of steeping bounce and 65% didn't make Murray's task easy. But the South African served only 5 aces, so the Scot's task was at least feasible. Really, it was Anderson's willingness to press the attack behind serves *and* returns that proved decisive. Murray seemed discontent enough to let him, in full retrieval mode, scampering dourly, until his opponent eventually put him away. Anderson was potent off the ground, especially on his approaches.

That is by some considerable margin the most baffling thing about Murray, the way that defence and attack are so discretely separated in his mind, the way it is one or the other. The three men ranked above him - and now far above him - are rightly famed not only for their capacity to transition immediately to offence, but also for their willingness to. When pressed, they grow bold. For Murray, however, it is usually either one or the other and whole sets can go by without a perceptible shift in approach. Generally the approach is pre-determined according to his opponent. He usually goes all out against Nadal, and is impressive until he unravels. Nadal by now realises that he must merely weather the initial tempest. Faced with Andy Roddick in the Queens semifinal, Murray calibrated himself for maximum hostility - inspiring Roddick's plea to 'keep it social' - and it was a definitive display. Two days later he

saw off Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in the final, having flicked the switch in his brain to Defensive. Tsonga dove and smashed his way to a lead, but couldn't finish it, and so Murray was largely vindicated.

Today, by Murray's own admission, he fell behind early, and thereafter the requirement to break Anderson's serve proved overwhelming. This is precisely the situation in which Nadal, Djokovic and Federer get busy, but Murray opted merely to dial down the intensity further. It is forgivable to begin sets badly - that happens to everyone, even Djokovic - but to then end them badly suggests you were either facing someone much better than you (which he wasn't) or that there is a problem with your approach. In the press conference afterwards he bemoaned the fact that 'nothing was working'. Admittedly, we've all had days like that, but we're not all world No.4, a two-time defending champion, and facing a guy who has never broken the top 30. At least, I'm assuming we're not. Honestly, I'm not certain what the match would have looked like if what Murray was doing had been working. There is only so much mastery you can bring to bear when your game plan consists of defending until your opponent misses, especially when he isn't.

Federer-like

Montreal Masters, Second and Third Rounds

(13) Tsonga d. (3) Federer, 7/6 4/6 6/1

Dodig d. (2) Nadal, 1/6 7/6 7/6

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga this evening defeated Roger Federer in an enthralling three set encounter that recalled last month's Wimbledon quarterfinal, in vibe if not in shape. As in London, it was the Frenchman's willingness to damn caution in the big moments that proved decisive. Federer, on the other hand, never deployed a commensurate boldness when it mattered most. Indeed, an uncharacteristic lack of fearlessness on the part of the big names has so far defined the week, though not as succinctly as the fact that most of them have lost.

Both points render my pretensions as a tennis analyst questionable. Following Murray's loss to Kevin Anderson, I went on at some length about how the Scot appears to lack whichever instinct allows his peers to transition so fluently and suddenly into attack when pressed. I don't think I was wrong about Murray, but both Federer and Nadal displayed little fight in their losses, and almost no willingness to push back when pressed. Nadal was arguably justified in thinking Ivan Dodig would prove incapable of sustaining attack for as long he did. But Federer had no excuse, since Tsonga proved as recently as last month that he can not only sustain that level, but elevate it if permitted to. As the commentator remarked tonight during that remarkable third set, Tsonga grew 'Federer-like'. Federer, it hardly needs to be said, didn't.

For their parts, Murray and Nadal certainly played their matches all wrong, but they were still unfortunate to have flat days against journeymen playing the matches of their lives. I don't mean 'journeyman' in any derisory sense, but both Anderson's and Dodig's elevated form in securing such extravagant upsets was thrown into sharp relief when each lost without fuss in the following round, to Wawrinka and Tipsarevic respectively. Tsonga may be ranked a modest 16, but since the clay season ended he has surely numbered among the top five or six players in the world, not merely on results on but on raw ability. Federer would have done better to treat him as such, and to approach tonight's match a semifinal. This is only amplified when we consider that Tsonga has somehow transformed himself into a tough matchup for Federer, an impressive feat against the greatest and most complete player of the era. Bear in mind that the calm assurance with which Tsonga served out tonight's match - and their Wimbledon quarterfinal - was nowhere in evidence against Bernard Tomic yesterday. The standard word on Tsonga before this year was that for all he was an impressive physical specimen, he was streaky, and that pronounced technical deficiencies in his service return and backhand would ultimately curtail his ascent up the rankings, even if he could dodge injury. He seems to have addressed those concerns, if in an atypical - and therefore typically French - way. To take one example, if top coaches were invited to compile a list of ways to improve Tsonga's backhand, the idea of incorporating a seemingly gratuitous one-handed passing shot into his repertoire would probably not feature. And yet he has, and it is certainly working. He hardly ever misses with that thing, and it looks more natural than his

two-hander. It capped off his most Federer-like point of the match, in which he ran down a drop-volley and flicked the backhand cross-court for a winner.

With that said, the drop-volley hadn't been very good, and was only necessitated by an approach driven conveniently at the waiting Tsonga's forehand. From memory, it was a breakpoint. It was a terrible lapse on Federer's part, one of several, all of which hinted at an underlying caution. He played not to miss, and to be fair he didn't miss much. But neither did Tsonga, and the bits of the court that Tsonga didn't miss were all closer to the lines.

Inevitably, parallels will be drawn between this match and the pair's encounter two years ago on the same court, which was similar in shape but not in vibe. In that match, Federer had led 5/1 in the third, before losing the match in a tiebreaker. Of course, he was invited to ruminate on the connection afterwards. Characteristically, he showed little inclination to do so: 'Two years ago he [Tsonga] didn't really deserve the victory. I believe he played a lot better today, and he deserved it today. Two years ago I think he was lucky to pull out the win. Tonight he played well and he played extraordinary shots as we know he can do. I was not able to do that.' This seems true enough, but it begs the question: was the issue that Federer was not able to play extraordinary shots, or that he just didn't attempt them?

A Comforting Thought

Montreal Masters, Semifinals

Fish d. Tipsarevic, 6/3 6/4

When Mardy Fish assumed the mantle of the top ranked US male tennis player, there was a widespread and mostly justified belief that his ascent owed as much to Andy Roddick's decline as anything else. Fish himself was neither slow nor coy in agreeing, and he remains manically diffident in all matters Davis Cup, insisting to anyone straying into earshot that Roddick is still the main man. That's generous, especially since they recently combined so perfectly in losing to Spain, but there's a difference between playing second fiddle and taking up the viola. US fans were

probably right in hoping their top player would assert himself a little more. The United States hasn't gotten to where it is by not throwing its weight around, loudly.

Reaching the quarterfinals at Wimbledon was a stride in the right direction, given that it is both a surface that should suit Fish's game, and a tournament that American fans associate with excellence, even if Roddick himself associates it with crushing losses to Roger Federer. But it has always been on the North American hardcourts that Fish's finest results have accrued - passive voice intended - suggesting that the goodwill of his compatriots means as much to him as whatever the court is made of. His perennially poor showings on foreign hardcourts - from Australia and Asia to the European indoors - attest to this. As the tour returned to the States, patriotic eyes - wept dry after Austin - were typically merciless, unblinking.

So far so good. Fish defended his Atlanta title, if barely, before being hustled out of LA by Ernests Gulbis. Pulling out of Washington hardly endeared him to the tournament organisers, who were rightly worried that the event might consequently disappoint, a worry that proved justified. Still, it turned out to be a scheduling masterstroke from Fish. Thus rested, he has ambled through to the final of the Montreal Masters, the only person not named Novak Djokovic to do so. Mostly interestingly, until today he had progressed without playing very well at all. The quarterfinal against Stan Wawrinka was particularly uninspired. He and his fans should be encouraged by this. Until now, Fish's greatest accomplishments - including his top ten ranking - have always come when he performs at his limits, if not beyond them (see Indian Wells in 2008). This week, aided by a miraculously cleared draw, he has managed to progress to a fourth Masters final without impressing anyone, even if today he was clearly a class above Janko Tipsarevic.

His manifest superiority over the Serbian No.3 justifies a moment's diversion. Montreal has been arguably the high-water mark of Tipsarevic's career, if we set aside last year's Davis Cup final, in which he personally contributed little more than stomach ulcers for the home crowd. He will enter the top twenty tomorrow, for the first time in his career. He hasn't won a tournament yet, but I've no doubt he is good enough to, and seeing a No.20 next to his name doesn't seem unreasonable. But he was no match for Fish, who smartly opted out of trading groundstrokes with his opponent, and surged netward almost constantly. Fish looked like a top ten player.

Not a top ten player playing out of his mind, naturally, but nonetheless like a top ten player. Whether he wins the final or not, he will rise to No.7 when the rankings are released on Monday.

Coming into the US summer, the looming question was always whether Fish could defend his points from last year's Cincinnati final. It is to his credit that the question has become less important than it might have been. His portfolio of strong results has grown sufficiently diverse that he is protected from the odd poor week. Indeed, he could pull out of Cincinnati next week and he would probably fall no lower than No.9. It's a comforting thought, something to hang onto while Djokovic tears him to pieces tomorrow.

Resistance Is Futile

Montreal Masters, Final

(1) Djokovic d. (6) Fish, 6/2 3/6 6/4

Novak Djokovic's excellent gambol through 2011 continues untrammelled, although for all that it has ranked among the most impressive runs in men's tennis history, it is only now that he has captured a significant record. He has become the first man ever to claim five Masters 1000 events in a single season. (The manliness of this achievement has been commemorated with an appropriately phallic trophy.)

Contrary to what some have written, he has not swept them all, since Nadal won Monte Carlo; a minor quibble, given it's just Monte Carlo and Djokovic declined to play. There are three Masters remaining in 2011 - with one already underway in Cincinnati - and who's to say he won't claim one of them, or all of them? Certainly the rest of the men's tour seems to have little say in the matter.

Such considerations usher weightier records into view, most particularly McEnroe's unsurpassed 1984, in which he lost just three matches, and won 84. Federer came within a few points of replicating that in 2005, before he fell to Nalbandian in the Masters Cup final. Djokovic now stands at 53-1, and at a rough guess I would say he has another nine or so events to play before year's end, assuming Serbia makes the Davis Cup final. 31 more wins and two more losses is a tough ask, especially across

a stretch that will feature the US Open (which he has never won) and the World Tour Finals (which he has). It seems like a long shot, but Djokovic has proved the folly of positing limits based on mere history. Then again, I have a quite irrational feeling that he won't be winning the US Open. If pressed I couldn't say why.

Possibly it is because he wasn't all that far away from not winning Montreal. Given how lustily I sang Mardy Fish's legitimacy as a top ten player just yesterday, it was gratifying when he set about living up to it today, although it is possible he was motivated by something other than a desire to prove me right. Either way, he has supplanted Gael Monfils at No.7, and so it was fitting that his loss to the world No.1 contrasted so radically to the Frenchman's effort two rounds earlier. Monfils checked out early and thoroughly, while Fish shrugged off a hugely disappointing first set to make a real match of it in the second. He has now lost more Masters finals than Andy Murray has major finals, but unlike the Scot he invariably goes down fighting. His third set wasn't bad either, besides a couple of game when it couldn't have gone worse. Unforced errors flowed, and Djokovic was suddenly everywhere.

This sudden ubiquity also provided the most telling moment of the week. During a changeover in the Federer-Tsonga match, a tediously lightweight interview with Djokovic appeared on the Jumbotron. Distracted, Federer glanced up. A sardonic smile ghosted his lips. Then his expression collapsed into disgust, he shook his head, leaped up and strode back out onto court, well before Lahyani could call time. Djokovic was in the great Swiss' head. He is in everyone's head. Resistance is futile.

Raging Impotence

Cincinnati Masters, First and Second Rounds

The centrepiece of the week so far has been Andy Roddick's lamentable capitulation to Philipp Kohlschreiber - belatedly lamented - a mental collapse that was almost out of character, punctuated by an utterly characteristic set-to with the umpire. Denied ready access to the flak-happy Fergus Murphy, Roddick instead channelled his ire at Carlos Bernardes, whose crime had been to punish Roddick with a point-penalty on a break point. The raging impotence of the subsequent outburst revealed a man still

very much in the initial, essentially-Leaeresque phase of his decline, although insipid pettiness and low grade thugishness have proved to be enduring *leitmotifs* for Roddick's entire career.

The upset of the week saw Jo-Wilfried Tsonga collapse to Alex Bogomolov Jr., in its way a bigger shock than Andy Murray's loss to the same man back in March, which at the time I likened to electrodes to the genitals. Murray had been in a slump, and Tsonga has played beautifully since Queens. Not today. Andy Murray, incidentally, is in another slump, but was fortunate to encounter in David Nalbandian a man who has forgotten more about playing disappointing tennis than even Murray may ever learn. It was billed as the day's marquee matchup, and so the disappointment was compounded.

Yesterday's marquee matchup saw Federer avenge some losses dating back to last decade, defeating a frankly underdone Juan Martin del Potro. Federer hardly looked like losing, although for a while, as he tossed away break points like confetti, he didn't look much like winning either. The second set thus developed into something of an impasse. At 5/5 in the second, the man they call Juan Martin del Potro resolved the stand-off by breaking himself. Federer then served it out to love, apart from two forehands he hit out for no reason. Until then, he'd served beautifully.

Michael Llodra's attacking game has never enjoyed success on the fast North American hardcourts, and there's really no good reason why. He saw off Mikhail Youzhny in a ripping first rounder, suggesting that his time had come. Then he lost to Verdasco, somehow and easily, proving that for a Frenchman on a roll 'no good reason' remains reason enough. Verdasco next faces Nadal, in the most concentrated part of the Spanish half of the draw. Nearer the top, David Ferrer returned to tour duties, and saw off Grigor Dimitrov deep in the third, yet another of those matches that Dimitrov could have won to announce his arrival, the types of wins that his near-contemporaries have used to leapfrog him in the 'next-big-thing' stakes. Less a Baby Federer than a Baby Haas, then.

The other big story of the week is that Andrei Golubev has put together his longest winning streak since early March: one. In between he lost a truly heroic 18 matches. In the opening match of the year at the Hopman Cup, I watched Golubev blast the

anointed Novak Djokovic off the court for a set and a bit. Now he sits at 4-22 for the year, and only narrowly failed to capture the record for worst losing streak in ATP history (21 matches and still held by Vince Spadea, who from his Twitter posts I gather is both illiterate and insane). Anyway, Golubev's treasured win was over Stan Wawrinka - who had seemed to be rounding into some form - and his inevitable loss the following round was to Radek Stepanek.

Bad Scene

Cincinnati Masters, Third Round

(2) Nadal d. Verdasco, 7/6 6/7 7/6

(10) Simon d. (5) Ferrer, 6/4 6/7 6/4

The pressing issue in Cincinnati today was crap tennis, which is a bad issue for a Masters 1000 event to have. Blunt disappointment seemed to blanket each court in the (allegedly) stifling heat. As an Australian, you may colour me unimpressed by the temperature, but about the deflation there can be no dispute. Every third round match took place today, and few of them provided much interest beyond revealing whether both men would prove inept, or only one.

Four Spaniards were in action, and all played so poorly that all four deserved to lose. Sadly, that proved unlikely as two of them were facing each other, and so one was compelled to win. As ever, that one was Rafael Nadal, who has now stretched his domination over Fernando Verdasco to 12 matches without a loss. There's surely bad blood there. Verdasco's tepid handshake at the end said it all, or what little the hopelessly poor match hadn't already said for itself. That it said it at such length - something like three and a half hours - will inevitably lend the encounter some cachet. It seems axiomatic that if a tennis match is to be horrendously dull, it might as well go on for as long as possible. Think of Nadal and Djokovic in Madrid a couple of years ago, when they played out the longest best of three match in history. It certainly felt like it at the time.

David Ferrer and Gilles Simon set about inspiring a similar sensation a short time later. Simon had a golden chance to end the match in straight sets, but, having attained match point, he crucially thought better of it. Then he thought better of it another four times. It went the *distance*. Nadal and Verdasco produced an even 100 unforced errors between them, whilst Ferrer and Simon topped that by some considerable margin, quite a feat considering both their games are based around hitting the ball in at any cost.

For a wonder, of the three Spaniards who lost today, Nicolas Almagro conducted himself with the most on-court reserve - both Ferrer and Verdasco dropped their bundles repeatedly - although he was admittedly the farthest from winning. Perhaps his heart wasn't in it. His opponent, Tomas Berdych, remained merely solid, which today that was more than enough to guarantee a win. Given the prevailing vibe, Monfils v Kohlschreiber thus had Carnival of Suck written all over it, so it was surprising when the Frenchman proved similarly unflappable, and watched on with idle curiosity as the German fell in a heap. The match was not necessarily more enjoyable as a result, but it was over quicker. It's odd how these things change, almost as though there's a roster in place. Two rounds ago Kohlschreiber stood by while Roddick disintegrated. Meanwhile, in the quarterfinal Monfils will face Djokovic, which is unfailingly 'Lamonf's' cue to go haywire.

The Heart of Rage

Cincinnati Masters, Quarterfinals

(1) Djokovic d. (6) Monfils, 3/6 6/4 6/3

The Roman philosopher Seneca once remarked, perceptively, that rage is self-punishment for others mistakes. As a statement it packs rather a lot into very few words, and was doubtless even more compressed in the original Latin. Among other things, it deftly suggests that at the heart of rage lies frustrated expectations, which I think Seneca also said. (It also cautions the reader that succumbing to rage does most harm to ourselves, which may or not be true, and largely depends on where you rate *spiritual* damage in the scheme of things. Victims of road rage probably rate

it somewhere below the grievous wounds they sustain.) It warns us that in order to curtail rage it is essential to calibrate our expectations realistically. Road rage, it follows, bears the imprint not merely of our frustration at other drivers' failure to meet our expectations, but from having unrealistic expectations in the first place, not only of our fellow drivers, but of driving in general, if not of life.

Anyway, these thoughts meandered through my mind as I watched Gael Monfils' stately capitulation to Novak Djokovic tonight. A perfect willingness to be personally affronted by any player's ineptitude is a bad way to watch tennis, but when Monfils is involved, you're just asking for trouble. For a good set and a half, the Frenchman looked set to confound my prediction that he would rapidly fold to the world No.1. Coming into the match, he had lost something like nine straight sets, including a 6/2 6/1 drubbing just last week in Montreal, but he looked a transfigured player as he broke Djokovic twice to take the opening set. He fell behind an early break in the second, but displayed great fortitude to break back, not to mention considerable virtuosity at the net. Then he forgot how to play tennis, which served the dual purpose of gifting a hitherto disinterested opponent the momentum, and of inspiring at least one commentator to almost blow his stack.

It was like seeing Seneca's axiom play out as a drama, or at any rate a dry comedy. It commenced when Monfils served an excellent wide delivery to the first court, which Djokovic desperately floated back. Presented with the open court, Monfils opted to *slice* a forehand into the net. The commentator was apoplectic. There was a *tirade*. Predictably, endless iterations of this followed, but reading about them wouldn't be as fun as watching them was. I'll just say that when tough got going, Monfils reverted to type, and retreated to his customary position by the backboard. Robbie Koenig managed to find enough to delight himself with - such as Monfils' baffling decision to scoot around and hit a *left-handed* forehand volley at one point - but his booth-mate was in that dark place beyond enjoyment. Monfils had saved a break point early in the first set with a gutsy second-serve ace up the T. In the third he gifted the crucial break by going for the same serve. The first had been 'brave' and precisely the kind of thing he would need to do to beat Djokovic. As you might imagine, the second merited a less generous assessment. There was a *rant*.

By the end, I was forced to wonder: based on everything we know about Monfils, and knowing how every one of his recent matches with Djokovic has unfolded, had anyone really expected anything different? The answer, I think, is that hope springs eternal, and that deep in the heart of the fan it will always trump realism. The commentator had doubtless come in expecting little, but when Monfils romped through that opening set, and demonstrated commendable grit in breaking back in the second, the belief had flickered that the Frenchman might actually pull off the upset. After all, he has done it before, and it would hardly even be the first upset today, with both Nadal and Federer departing in straight sets. Was another shock really too much to expect? Seneca says yes.

More importantly, Djokovic said yes. Remember: resistance is futile.

Victory without Triumph

Cincinnati Masters, Final

(4) Murray d. (1) Djokovic, 6/4 3/0 Ret.

For the second week in a row, Novak Djokovic arrived at a Masters final courtesy of a default. Today he departed due to one, meaning that his second streak of the year has ended not with a Parisian bang - an event otherwise not to be missed - but with a soggy Midwestern whimper. The tin sky wept and Andy Murray, even in victory, remained as glum as ever. It was victory, but it was hardly triumph.

Still, it's better than losing, and certainly beats stuffing your right shoulder a week out from the year's last major. Watching Murray eventually hoist that strange urn, I was reminded of last year's Asian swing, when he subsided meekly for Ivan Ljubicic in Beijing, only to rise to the Shanghai title a week later, venomously thrashing an in-form Roger Federer in the final. Actually, in writing that I am reminded of countless other examples. Inconsistency is the thing to know about Murray, the sole certainty. After all, arriving in Cincinnati, he had not won a set on North American hardcourts this year, a combination of geography and surface that traditionally suits him best. Now, Murray has his seventh Masters title, and by the reckoning of some - including the flippantly flighty Jim Courier - has pushed his way to favouritism for the US Open,

a psychic space historically guaranteed to cripple the dour Scot. Let's see how that one plays out. If Djokovic wasn't Djokovic, and if his shoulder wasn't bugged, Murray would probably be the story of the week.

But there's just no getting away from Novak right now. He has suffered just his second loss of 2011, so that's a story in itself, and will sustain everyone for a day or two. By then the US Open build-up week will be well into its stride, an escalating chain of tawdry, lame or dull Media Events, designed to pique our interest, and not to be confused with those interminably humourless press conferences inflicted on top players, which serve no discernible purpose at all. It's here that you have to feel for Djokovic. He will endure approximately 82,000 questions about his shoulder, and he will have no choice but to give the same answer each time, since it's just a shoulder and there's not that much to say. Whatever he says, it will be all he can say, and it certainly won't be the whole truth.

For those more desirous of portent or precedent, let's travel back exactly ten years. Gustavo Kuerten was the best player on Earth, and by thrashing an in-form Pat Rafter in the Cincinnati final had ably demonstrated that his journey to all-court mastery was now complete. Back then top players played a lot more tennis than now - they also feasted nightly on gluten - and so Rafter and Kuerten also met in the Indianapolis final a week later, on the eve of the US Open. Kuerten withdrew with a seemingly innocuous hip injury, the merest precaution. No one thought much of it. Although the beloved Brazilian would continue on the tour for some years, his time at the top of the sport had ended. From nowhere.

Old News

Winston-Salem, First Round

Kavcic d. Hewitt, 6/4 7/6

The news is now a long day old that Lleyton Hewitt has withdrawn from the US Open, a tournament he won a decade ago. What meagre shock the announcement might have engendered has surely sluiced away quickly, and barely exceeded the dull queasiness caused by his loss to Blaz Kavcic earlier in the week, which shocked

me most by not surprising me at all. Is this how the Hewitt tale will end, with Monday exits and wildcards handed back? Spirit willing yet flesh weak?

The weak flesh was in his foot, which has been slow to mend. He felt twinges during the match, yet played on. In stark contrast to, say Tsonga or Djokovic, Hewitt's heart proved sufficiently willing, and so he battled lamely on to the loss, and thence to a US Open withdrawal. Both Tsonga and Djokovic pulled out of far more important matches, and have been widely and justly lambasted, but they will be playing in New York. There's a lesson here somewhere . . . Let's make it even clearer: back in June Hewitt retired to Olivier Rochus at Eastbourne, having felt a familiar twinge in weak flesh, and deciding it was hardly worth jeopardising his increasingly quixotic campaign to recapture Wimbledon. He made it all the way to the second round, and scrapped mightily in going down to Soderling. In the scheme of things it wasn't much, but nor was it nothing.

Sadly, the lesson is that precautionary retirements will almost always prove more prudent, especially with a major just around the corner. But that hardly makes them right, or anything more noble than an attempt to game the system, at the expense of the tournament, the crowd and one's opponent. Hewitt was right to have played on against Kavcic, just as, say, Nadal was right to play on against Ferrer at the Australian Open, instead of shrugging wryly, and condescendingly pointing out that he probably wasn't going to win anyway, as though we didn't get it. We are right to question Tsonga and Djokovic's pissweak defaults, decisions born of the common cynicism that seeks dignity through naming itself expediency.

Luck of the Draw: US Open 2011

The US Open draw ceremony has been completed, having proved about as interesting as these things can, which is to say not very. Rafael Nadal was on hand to lend the affair some cachet, and he performed his assigned task of drawing numbers out of a trophy with consummate professionalism. Given that this is a task that my two-year-old son could excel at, it would take a special effort indeed to over-emphasise Nadal's performance. Tennis.com made that special effort:

I was amused to see that instead of merely handing the chip to Gayle Bradshaw, so he could match the number to the name on his seeding list and call out the player's name, Rafa quite unnecessarily[sic] took it upon himself to call out the number each time he pulled a chip. Whatever else you want to say about Nadal, this little detail suggests that he's got a real team player's instinct. And if agrees to do a job, he'll do it the right way. It's in such little moments that you often get glimpses into a person's basic character.

I am happily reminded of that famous Chinese proverb, that you do not truly know a man until you've watched him pull numbered objects out of a container of some kind, probably. It also means that a post-tennis career conducting lotteries in the third-world is a real possibility for the Spaniard. Something to fall back on.

In the meantime, he'll presumably be staying with tennis a while longer, given that he has been gifted a draw as favourable as his last one. He opens against Andrei Golubev, whose winning streak of one was cruelly cut short last week. As ever, Nadal has been drawn to face a Spaniard in the quarterfinals. As was the case in Melbourne, it is David Ferrer, who proved so merciless in crushing an injured friend's dream of completing the 'Rafa Slam', which was kind of a big deal at the time. Nadal is due to face Murray in the semifinals. Yes, that's correct: *again*.

It also means that Djokovic and Federer are drawn to meet in the other semifinal. The wailing of the conspiracy theorists is fit to lift the roof, or it would if they didn't all live in caves. It's all *rigged*. This configuration has occurred at 14 of the last 16 majors, which seems to me to be an excuse to revel in the vagaries of chance. Characteristically, the cynics have proven less whimsical.

This time around they've arrived with ammunition slightly more potent than their own idiocy, most notably a piece that appeared on ESPN's *Outside The Lines* recently, which made the rather minor claim that the top two men's and women's seeds have traditionally faced less threatening opponents than they statistically should have, and then linked it to the rather large claim that the US Open draw was therefore being manipulated. At its heart, it was unremarkable tabloid guff, and should have elicited no response stronger than mild diversion. Inevitably, the mole-hill became a mountain.

Permitting for a moment the scope of the claims, it begs the question of why the USTA would even bother? Do the top two seeds have so much trouble navigating the first round that such measures are necessary? And what about the next few seeds? Further analysis reveals nothing untoward about their draws. Furthermore, there are no strikingly anomalous results in subsequent rounds, which you might think would be the case if the goal was to ensure the seeds gained safe passage into the second week. Furthermore, it's not as though the top two seeds have always been Nadal and Federer (they aren't this year). In years gone by, what would the USTA hope to gain by helping out, say, Dinara Safina? Does anyone really believe they would risk an inevitable shit-storm of controversy for her? Yes, people do. Somehow, they believe that.

They also believe that the draw was rigged for Federer and Nadal to be on opposite sides, notwithstanding that the draw was seeded based on the order in which Nadal so revealingly drew those tokens from the trophy. Clearly he's in on it too, although you'd have to imagine he'd rather face Federer than Murray in the semifinal. I suppose the USTA's plans are more nebulous and ineffable than we can possibly fathom. It doubtless goes right to the top, and if they are willing to go to considerable effort to provide an unnecessary advantage to a few players, there's no telling what pointless extravagancy they're capable of.

The Undemonstrative Frenchman

Winston-Salem, Final

(4) Isner d. (Q) Benneteau, 4/6 6/3 6/4

Julien Benneteau is a player I would say I have a lot of time for, and I even believe it as I say it, but the truth is that I've only ever watched a handful of his matches, with the win over Federer in Paris a few years ago standing out. Clearly I don't have *that* much time for him. Perhaps I enjoy the idea of him more: an undemonstrative Frenchman, who unlike so many of his compatriots sidesteps the trite discourse of talent-to-burn duly combusting. The uncharitable response would be that Benneteau had less talent to begin with, and it wouldn't necessarily be untrue. But there remains

an appealing and workmanlike introspection to his game, one not unrelated to the commensurate pleasure he takes in his wins; products of hard labour. His compatriots disappoint everyone almost constantly, but they never seem sufficiently frustrated in themselves. Benneteau's disappointment today was all for himself, however quickly it was subsumed. The hot tears he shed into his towel remind us that for all Winston-Salem is a minor tournament, and rendered even less consequential by its proximity to the US Open, for some players winning it would mean everything.

Benneteau's career bloomed late, when he was already 26 years of age, and almost immediately began to wilt. Its fullest flowering occurred between April 2008 and February 2010, a period in which he reached four finals, and won none. Thereafter, runner-up frustrations became third round disappointments became first round humiliations, and by last month he had fallen from the top hundred, apparently irretrievably. But the odd thing about the rankings in this area is that you're only ever one big result away from a return to the big time. So it has proven. By reaching the final in Winston-Salem Benneteau will climb back up to No.86, and judging by the breakdown of his current points, he'll probably fall no lower until well into next year, his 30th.

It would be tough to argue he doesn't deserve it. He arrived at the tournament as a Qualifier, and losing in the final required playing nine matches in eight days, in trying conditions. It was a long way to come, only to fall short from a set in front. By the time he was compelled to ruminate on his efforts, he was saying all the right things, stressing his pride in coming so far, and so forth. Perhaps by then it was true, but he'd presented a rather different picture immediately after the match had ended, sobbing into his towel, looking for all the world like a man who was now 0-5 in career finals, and suspects there won't be a sixth.

The Merely Talented

US Open, First Round

(7) Monfils d. Dimitrov, 7/6 6/3 6/4

(27) Cilic d. Harrison, 6/2 7/5 7/6

Tomic d. Yani, 6/3 6/4 6/4

If compelled (under duress) to say what it is about Grigor Dimitrov that makes him the alleged stand-out among the current batch of up-and-comers, I would be hard-pressed to come up with much. He has just succumbed to Gael Monfils in three entertaining sets, so it certainly isn't his results, although his season has not been anything like as poor as some make out. (He is ranked about 130 places higher than he was last August.) Still, a big scalp wouldn't hurt. Monfils' would have done nicely.

The standard word on Dimitrov is 'talent', a compliment that has grown so devalued through over-use that it has become downright backhanded. (Ironically, his backhand rarely merits compliment.) Nonetheless, according to many - even Milos Raonic - Dimitrov is the *most* talented of the group. I'm not certain what that means, since Raonic's serve seems like a fairly significant talent. Indeed if we run through the group of them - Harrison, Tomic, etc. - it's hard to deny that they're all pretty talented. But they also all have clear and potent strengths. It might be something as obvious as the serves of Raonic and Harrison, or it may be something less tangible, such as Tomic's weird capacity to drive every opponent spare, but in each case it provides a core around which their play can be structured. What is the core of Dimitrov's game?

Watching the Bulgarian struggle heroically to not take a set from the world No.7, I was faced with an awkward question: which part of Dimitrov's game wasn't working such that fixing it would permit him to beat top opponents? It wasn't as though his amazing serve just wasn't clicking, or that his movement was uncharacteristically sluggish, or that his masterful point-construction was repeatedly undone by crucial errors on the put-aways. He served fine, his movement was fine, and his unforced errors - even on forcing shots - would rarely have been winners had they cleared the net. It's hard to shake the feeling that we name Dimitrov talented because we don't

know what else to say. Meanwhile over on Arthur Ashe, Federer may have been spraying balls everywhere, but he was really belting the shit out of them.

Naturally, comparing Dimitrov to Federer is as unfair as it is tempting - since 'talent' is here broadly synonymous with 'potential' - and we should bear in mind that in Monfils Dimitrov today faced a decidedly superior opponent to any of his contemporaries. The Frenchman played with unusual variety and maturity, and even partly hobbled he is astonishingly nimble. Harrison meanwhile fell to Marin Cilic, again in straight sets, a match he was widely expected to win. To be fair, the American did serve for both the second and third sets, and led in the tiebreak, so he wasn't far off making it closer. You could certainly see which parts of his game were letting him down, and in case you couldn't, Harrison helpfully signposted each transgression by launching his racquet at the court surface. Temperament is something else to work on.

Tomic easily survived three uneventful sets, although his opponent Michael Yani looked frankly outclassed. Notwithstanding that Yani has beaten Tomic several times at the Challenger level, the ease with which the Australian won suggests that he has progressed to a higher level in line with his improved ranking. If Tomic's fundamental game is sophisticated noodling, it is enhanced by the weapons that augment it. He boasts a strong backhand up the line, almost perfect disguise on nearly every stroke, and the capacity to generate power on his forehand seemingly from nowhere. It is the quiet threat of this stinging sudden power that renders the rest of his game so effective, and coupled with his tremendous disguise means that opponents are consistently caught on their heels, or guessing wrong. He also gives the most boring interviews imaginable, which I'm convinced is also a kind of talent.

Subtle Iterations

US Open, First Round

Gulbis d. (16) Youzhny, 6/2 6/4 6/4

Ernest's Gulbis today won just his second set at Grand Slam level since Wimbledon 2009. Apparently delighted by the sensation, he then won his third and fourth, which

proved to be the requisite number to claim the match, although he could be forgiven for not knowing this in advance. It has been a while. He played with considerable poise throughout, saving all ten breakpoints, and never reverted to the sardonic slump that usually defines his wins *and* losses. It is arguable just how much of the Latvian's resurgence can be laid at the feet of his new coach Guillermo Canas, but it has surely helped. Perhaps maturity also played its part: today was his 23rd birthday.

Meanwhile, his 29-year-old opponent Mikhail Youzhny didn't win any sets, which was a decisive factor in not winning the match. He hasn't won much lately. Youzhny reached the semifinals of the US Open last year, and by leaving the tournament so early will amply demonstrate the importance of maintaining a diverse portfolio of points. When your ranking is composed of just a few big point hauls, a bad day means disaster. Failing to defend last year's semifinal will see the Colonel shed about a third of his points, and he will likely leave the top No.30. Given the way he has played this year, this unfortunately feels about right.

(2) Nadal d. Golubev, 6/3 7/6 7/5

Later on Andrei Golubev demonstrated to everyone's satisfaction - especially Rafael Nadal's - that his ability to achieve set points is exceeded only by his determination not to win them. It goes some way towards explaining how so talented a ball-striker - 'tremendous' according to Lleyton Hewitt - can lose 18 matches in a row. As ever he struck fabulous winners off both wings, teed off on Nadal's second serve and ran the defending champion ragged. But he never once managed to do it on the most important points. Nadal watched on warily, understandably curious to see how it would all work out.

It worked out that all three sets subtly iterated on a single theme, which was of Golubev gaining an early break, viciously wresting momentum from a strangely-passive world No.2, and then emphatically failing to capitalise. Within these fairly strict parameters he achieved some striking variation, such as blowing seven set points in the second set - including 40-0 on his own serve - and gaining a 5/2 lead in the third. For added spice, there were also meltdowns and a sustained tirade against Carlos Ramos that roamed across several Romance languages. It was terrific entertainment, and Nadal had the best view in the house. Patiently awaiting

Golubev's inevitable self-destruction, I could say that Nadal knew something we didn't, but really, we all knew it already.

A Comprehensive Threshing

US Open, Second Round

The 2011 US Open is well into its first week, which in the final reckoning will be the week that no one remembers. It is ever thus, especially in New York where the final set tiebreak rule precludes the possibility of a timeless - or merely endless - epic. This is a shame, since, even if history doesn't agree, there is no shortage of great tennis in the first week, fascinating trends and by-plays, which may or not see resolution by the second Monday.

Chief interest through the early going has lay in the striking contrast between the first and second rounds. The first round was defined by tremendous chokes (Golubev, Troicki) and stirring recoveries from two sets down (Darcis, Bogomolov, Kunitsyn, Mahut, Sela). We are now halfway through the second round, and the main things to take away from today were the severity of the thrashings doled out, and the comprehensiveness with which French hopes were dashed (although Tsonga won). Without aiming to insult either the thrashed or the French - only Llodra was both - the overall sense has been of chaff being separated out: less thrashing than threshing.

Roger Federer took 77 minutes to dispose of Dudi Sela, while Fabio Fognini fought to 5/5 in the first set against Tomas Berdych, and then lost the next 14 games. He might well have claimed the 14 after that but the match was over. Marin Cilic and Bernard Tomic were widely expected to fight out a close one, and of the three games Tomic eventually won, all were indeed close, although few of the other 18 were. As I write this, Novak Djokovic is typically looking to top everyone, taking the first two sets at love, although he has just been broken in the third, denying us the first triple bagel in 18 years.

Ferrero d. (7) Monfils, 7/6 5/7 6/7 6/4 6/4

It is now eight years since Juan Carlos Ferrero reached the final of the US Open, where he fell to Andy Roddick, and over seven years since he has achieved much else of note. This isn't to say that beating Gael Monfils in five sets in the second round is a particularly stunning achievement, but given that Monfils was seeded seventh and wasn't playing half bad - the more aggressive tendencies we glimpsed in Cincinnati were once more sporadically in evidence - it must be considered an upset.

Ferrero's jaggedly-contoured career is irreversibly winding down - the Indian Summers growing more frigid and farther apart - but enough of the old spirit is there, and that's where it counted today. Ferrero fought his way to the No.1 ranking on the back of his superlative court-speed and his forehand, but here today the twin narratives of mortality and progress were writ large. At 31, the Spaniard has naturally slowed, and his forehand has lost its erstwhile penetration, but he was never as fast as Monfils, and he could never rip groundstrokes at over 150km/h the way the Frenchman can and does. But he is a champion, enormously more experienced than his opponent, and, as the fifth set got underway, for a wonder boasted greater reserves of stamina. Mental and physical fortitude have ever been the areas where Monfils is most suspect. Even coming off a five set victory in the first round, Ferrero looked fresher and sturdier.

Monfils' US summer adventures are now complete, and for all that he has fought more valiantly and applied himself with greater diligence than last year - recall his embarrassing collapse against Djokovic in New York 12 months ago - his results have hardly improved. He has much to think on, although based on the aggregated evidence of his on-court behaviour and Twitter updates, you'd have to say that measured reflection is not his greatest strength.

Scintillating and Spiritless

US Open, Second Round

(4) Murray d. Haase, 6/7 2/6 6/2 6/0 6/4

The distinct character defining each the US Open's first four days gave way on day five to a more heterogeneous mash-up of results, although at least one trend has persisted in the mounting number of defaults and walkovers. This time Nadal was the beneficiary, and Mahut the victim, or offender. A handful of Americans have progressed to the third round, temporarily allaying fears of impending national irrelevance. Notwithstanding Monfils' loss yesterday, the Men's draw has yet to witness an upset on par with Sharapova's egress from the Women's, but it was a near run thing. Jurgen Melzer is out.

If you aren't American, and therefore are not constitutionally bound to give a toss about Donald Young either way, day five's centrepiece was undoubtedly Andy Murray's five set victory over Robin Haase, a fascinating encounter that didn't showcase both men at their best, but did show each at his most typical. This was character as destiny: Murray grim, passive and brilliant, and Haase blithe, powerful and mercurial. With these basic materials in place, it was easy to see that the resulting match would be long and oscillating, by turns scintillating and spiritless, coruscating and crap. Easy in hindsight, that is, just like anything. Both men share extended lanky frames, a tendency towards afro if left untended, and truly cavernous mouths, factors which had little influence.

A ferocious athlete and determined shotmaker, Haase is seemingly impossible to stop once he gets on a roll. Fortunately for his opponents, his roll is only rarely got on, which partially explains his ranking of 41, and when it is on, the roll never lasts longer than two sets, which explains the rest. We saw this structural limitation play out last year at Wimbledon, when he led Rafael Nadal two set to one, only to mortally fade. We saw it again in Melbourne this year, when he blew Roddick from the court for a set and a bit, but proved fatally incapable of sustaining the attack. We saw it again today, when after matching Murray and claiming a tight first set, he lifted beyond the Scot's reach in the second, teeing off on every second serve, lashing the lines, and hustling Murray all over and then off the court. He conceded an early

break in the third, and then a long, tough Murray hold proved decisive, initiating a run of thirteen straight games lost, occasionally punctuated with racquets launched at the court and a return launched into the crowd. (Carlos Bernardes proved uncharacteristically reluctant to inflict the requisite code violations for these transgressions - recall Roddick's fit in Cincinnati - but it hardly mattered.) The enduring lesson is that Haase can be ground down, and that once the initial tempest has been weathered, plain sailing ensues. The best-of-five format provides a lot of ocean in which opponents might manoeuvre.

With Murray leading 4/0 in the fifth, the Eurosport commentators clearly agreed, and at the time it would have taken a visionary to contend otherwise. The Scot had won 13 straight games, Haase was flirting with point penalties and clutching his back, and the commentators began to assess the Murray's chances against Feliciano Lopez in the next round, laughingly admonishing each other to 'not get ahead of themselves' with wearisome bonhomie. They were British, but even so it was hard to begrudge them their presumption. Then, courtesy of divine caprice, Haase mounted an audacious comeback, taking the next four games in a passage of sustained all-court attack. Without precedent, a second hurricane had formed.

Murray looked too concerned even to remonstrate with himself or his player's box, always a sure sign that the trouble he's in is serious. Given the suddenness and unexpectedness of the fightback, perhaps there was simply no time. At 4/4, a tough game unfolded on the Dutchman's serve. Murray buckled down, he got a lucky net-cord on a pass, and burst out laughing at the absurdity of God's whimsy, then he broke. He served for the match, finally. A match point came and went. He took the second when a scorched Haase forehand landed wide. *Looked* wide. Haase challenged, perfunctorily. Why not? Millimetres *in*. Murray gave no response, and made no objection when deuce was called. Another match point, a second serve. This time Haase's return sailed long. Another challenge, but the handshake was concluded before the result was even shown. It was out.

Casualties

US Open, Third Round

Ferrero d. (31) Granollers, 6/1 3/4 ret.

(20) Tipsarevic d. (9) Berdych, 6/4 5/0 ret.

Word is that the ATP record for most retirements in a single tournament stands at ten, a tally that was today equalled in New York, and will doubtless be surpassed by the quarterfinals. If the women's event is included, that total climbs to something like 19. Inevitably, everyone has a theory to explain these numbers, and just as inevitably the most likely reason - coincidence - holds little allure. Coincidence makes for bland copy, and it denies one the chance to confect those narratives whereby sport approximates life, though not reality. Sport needs to be meaningful in order to be more than merely diverting. Anyway, the upshot is that players are apparently dropping left and right due to the heroic span of the season, the physicality of the modern game, and the hardness of the hardcourts.

However, whilst these explanations are not without consequence, given the broad variety of reasons cited for the defaults, as explanations they remain insufficient. The hardness of the surface does not explain the high number of upper body injuries, and the season's length has little to do with those stricken with viruses or food poisoning. Shit happens; when a lot of it happens in the same place at the same time, we might more usefully say that shit coincides. It's no less of a shame, but it's still just shit, and so ought to be kept in perspective. An arch of the eyebrow is more appropriate than a jerk of the knee.

As for today's casualties: first Tomas Berdych then Marcel Granollers failed to complete their respective matches. Granollers' back went early, and unexpectedly, providing welcome relief to his opponent, the aged and battle-wearied Juan Carlos Ferrero. Meanwhile, Berdych's engineering team apparently used the wrong kind of lubricant on the servos in his shoulder assembly, leading to a catastrophic mechanical failure as the first set got serious. The immediate winner was Janko Tipsarevic, who will now clear the cusp of the top twenty. In the longer view, the ultimate beneficiary will be Novak Djokovic, which is about as touching and useful as donating your dole payment to Bill Gates. Berdych in ominous form might have

presented the top seed's only challenge prior to the semifinals. Alas, Tipsarevic, if he progresses so far, will present no hindrance whatsoever. Whatever else defines the current era of men's tennis, the ossified national hierarchies are usually decisive in their way. Tipsarevic can no more defeat Djokovic in a major than Wawrinka can defeat Federer, or Verdasco defeat Nadal.

Historical Precedent

US Open, Fourth Round

(3) Federer d. Monaco, 6/1 6/2 6/0

(11) Tsonga d. (8) Fish, 6/4 6/7 3/6 6/4 6/2

Exceptional in so many ways, Roger Federer at 30 also eludes the various clichés directed at the elderly, most particularly that they aren't at their best late in the evening, having apparently dined at 4pm. He didn't appear on court until nearly midnight tonight, and, cranky at having to bother at all - not to mention *all the commotion* - he left in short order. Confounding common wisdom, he remains admirably merciless in his dotage, and massacred Juan Monaco in a touch over 80 minutes, less than half as long as he'd remained mired in the locker room while Karl Pilkington's sister - Caroline Wozniacki - gradually drew a shroud of tedium around Svetlana Kuznetsova, eventually smothering her to death.

Connoisseurs of Federer's trouncings will immediately think back to Miami, when he was obliged to wait past midnight while Maria Sharapova inflicted a coma-inducing double-fault clinic on the helpless crowd. Federer duly took out his frustrations on Olivier Rochus, ostensibly a friend. Tonight felt much the same, with the added threat of impending rain to augment the urgency. With every reason to be in a hurry, he hurried. Federer is usually pretty no-nonsense, and tonight there was even less nonsense than usual, especially on serve. Some of his service games lasted under a minute, less time than it takes Nadal to retrieve his underwear. One game consisted of four aces.

The parallels with Miami continue: Federer's following match was against a Frenchman who has historically had his measure (Gilles Simon). Replace 'historically' with 'recently', and we arrive at his next opponent in New York, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, who today saw off Mardy Fish in five very excellent sets. This was the tournament's first truly enticing match-up - widely anticipated the moment the draw was released - and it thankfully lived up to expectations. Fish won the US Open Series, which is mostly meaningless but nice for him, and given a more generous draw probably could have gone further in New York. He led Tsonga two sets to one today, but produced a truly lousy game late in the fourth, and ran out of juice in the fifth. Tsonga, meanwhile, only grew stronger. There was also a bit of a set-to between each man and the other player's box, prompting Fish to declare 'I don't speak French, dumbass' at Carlos Bernardes, although no one can quite say why. It wasn't clear at the time.

Tsonga and Federer will meet in two days' time, weather permitting. The Frenchman has defeated Federer twice of late, both times in quarterfinals. Meanwhile, back in Miami, Gilles Simon retired after just three games. If historical precedent is your thing, take your pick.

Rambling...

From the perspective of a rapacious media obliged to shovel grist in the 24-hour news-mill, a Grand Slam tournament is something of a free ride. Two weeks of constantly self-generating content, with another few days of follow up afterwards (assuming the winner isn't a complete bastard). Each major is consequently serviced by a legion of journalists, photographers and sundry types, although 'legion' implies rather more unity than is the case. The vibe is more mercenary than that. Still, as long as things are humming along nicely - favourites progressing, the odd upset, some epic matches, a steady trickle of recyclable sound bites - everyone seems satisfied.

The problem, inevitably, is that it becomes a very closed environment, and that its denizens sink readily into the relativism wrought by an abbreviated perspective. In

much the same way that the best looking woman in a workplace will invariably be cast as the 'good-looking' one, or the least unfunny guy will be the office wag, tennis players are summarily relegated to assigned roles by the professional onlookers. Thus we learn that Novak Djokovic is the 'funny' one, although for all that he seems like an affable fellow, I would hardly rank him alongside, say, Billy Connolly. Robin Soderling, on the other hand, has been traditionally cast as the 'villain' - there has to be one - although I suspect bigger sinners are growing old elsewhere in the world. Once the role has been decided upon, it is repeated so often that it becomes self-referencing, and thus true. Remembering back, part of the joy of leaving high school was the weightlessness wrought by the realisation that the labels we had all laboured under for years were suddenly meaningless. Sadly, life for many grows into a succession of similarly peopled milieus, even if the mechanisms by which they cohere grow more sophisticated, suggesting that the assigning of roles is as fundamental to human nature as narrative, which is to say that it is constructed, but not less essential for that.

As I say, so long as things are happening at a Grand Slam, and the media-types are sufficiently engaged, it all goes swimmingly. The problem arose when it started to rain, the tennis stopped, and the news cycle didn't. Whither might we turn for copy? Ample mileage had already been extracted from Nadal cramping in his press conference, Mardy Fish was out, and Andy Roddick has evolved from upbraiding commentators to declaring his adoration for the common people. (There followed some strained attempts to yoke this turnabout to the fatally fatuous discourse that purports to decouple the common people from the so-called experts atop their ivory towers. But as impressed as we all are that Roddick has reached what is meaninglessly called the 'second week', it's hard to forget that he hasn't yet faced anyone in the top 80, and that the more astute analysts have a point: by manufacturing a game that ensures he won't lose to those ranked below him (an ever-shrinking group), Roddick has guaranteed that he can hardly beat anyone above him. To the contention that he cannot realistically be expected to change his spots, the more dogged respond that Roddick was at one time a veritable excitement-machine, and that big hitting off the ground propelled his initial ascent in close lockstep with his serve. I recall his response before the 2004 Wimbledon final, when asked how he thought the match would play out, and his response that

Federer would display an amazing range of strokes and consummate artistry, while he (Roddick) would simply try to belt the crap out of the ball. I'm paraphrasing, put the point stands. Belting the crap out of the ball was once Roddick's thing, and the calls for him to do the same again are not calls for anything unprecedented. We know he can do it. Jim Courier made the point during the Australian Open that he suspects Roddick isn't actually aware how passively he actually rallies. Firstly, I wonder if this could possibly be true. Surely he has noticed how even the most pedestrian opponents easily run down all of his drives. Secondly, I wonder how diplomatically Courier put this to Roddick when the Davis Cup squad gathered. Whatever its other considerable shortcomings, Patrick McEnroe's *Hardcourt Confidential* was very good on how lightly the US team captain has to tread around the star player's egos, and Roddick's ego is a monster. Anyway, I digress.)

Caroline Wozniacki sought to liven things up by recreating Nadal's collapse in her own press conference for a lark. From the media reaction, you'd think she was lampooning juvenile cancer, as opposed to a fellow athlete falling off his chair. This provoked a number of commentators to compile outraged lists of the various pranks Wozniacki has indulged herself in this year, such as her one about being bitten by a kangaroo in Melbourne, or crashing Djokovic's presser at Wimbledon. Thereafter each article or comment grew patronising, and waxed paternal about how young the WTA No.1 is, and how much growing up she has still to do. Now, I don't find Wozniacki particularly funny, but I'm pleased enough she's trying. She's no less amusing than Djokovic's impressions, or Roddick haranguing the officials. Reading down her list of transgressions, the only unifying element seems to be the disdain she feels for the press. Therein, I suspect, lies the real issue. Perhaps there is greater unity than I thought, and the legion will close ranks against a common foe.

Since this is the US Open, and it is raining, the topic *du jour* is scheduling. It isn't news that the US Open has the most idiotic schedule of any of the majors, and that for a roofless event to spread the first round over three days is a disaster begging to happen, since it pushes everything back a day, and leaves little room to manoeuvre if and when the weather arrives. Well, the weather has arrived, and matches are backing up all over the place: the bottom half of the men's draw has yet to dent its fourth round. With more rain forecast for Thursday, there is little chance the

tournament will be concluded on Sunday. The *New York Times* put this to the tournament supervisor Jim Curley, and revealed with a tabloid flourish that should be beneath them that he 'did not rule out having either the men or women play twice in the same day'. With outrage in the air, and idle hands galore, the news that Nadal, Murray and Roddick marched balefully into the tournament referee's office was snapped up in a flash - which was understandable - and then sustained interminably - which was depressingly inevitable. The three players have been recast as instruments of righteous judgement. It's precisely the kind of event that feels important at the time, but will be forgotten once play has resumed. Pray it resumes tomorrow.

Cynical Voices

US Open, Fourth Round and Quarterfinals

(21) Roddick d. (5) Ferrer, 6/3 6/4 3/6 6/3

Andy Roddick today defeated David Ferrer in four sets, as comprehensive an upset as the difference in their respective rankings would suggest, notwithstanding that it took place on a fast hardcourt in the USA. It was also a match with baggage, as so many of Roddick's are these days. Ferrer of course defeated Roddick in that recent Davis Cup tie, on a fast court in Texas, which presumably explains the American's reaction afterwards, as he lapped the court, high-fiving a sampling of those common folk he suddenly loves so dearly. The court was Court 13, and *Das Volk* were thus very close, indeed.

The match had originally been scheduled for Louis Armstrong, but the initial promise of clear skies was rather undone when water began seeping up through the surface, owing to torrential rain augmenting the water table, and to the decision to build a tennis centre on a land-filled swamp. As puddles spontaneously formed near the baseline, a heated conference ensued, eventually arriving at the resolution to relocate to an outer court. Word all week has been that the outer courts are faster than the stadiums, although Ferrer raised no protest. As for the match, Roddick will doubtless fondly believe his win has silenced those armchair critics who dare

question his approach, but the fact is that he played well, and with sufficient aggression that all parties can now tilt back and declare they told us so. He next faces Rafael Nadal. Tell *him* so.

Other than too much water and Roddick admonishing those with the easiest job in the world, the other story of the tournament has been retirements. With Janko Tipsarevic's failure to complete his quarterfinal against Novak Djokovic - he could have played on, but by his own admission not well enough to win, a bona fide *warrior* - the US Open has now claimed the record for most retirements in a single event: 11. Aside from the volume, the most disappointing aspect has been the overall softness of the reasons given. Men's tennis has very suddenly arrived at a point where it is acceptable to pull out while you're still able to play, but don't think you will win. Cynical voices have suggested that Tipsarevic pulled out early not only to protect himself for the upcoming Davis Cup semifinal - he confessed as much - but to spare Djokovic further toil, to risk no pointless injury to his ordained countryman. As I say, cynical voices . . .

Divertimento

US Open, Quarterfinals

For the third time in a major, the Big Four make up the final four, an outcome that was apparently so unlikely as to be unforeseeable, even if the odds on it were reasonable. Now that it has happened again - and it is a common occurrence outside of the majors - it of course looks inevitable. How could anyone bet against it? Recall, however, the widespread certainty that Murray would find a way to fall early - and he almost did, to Haase - and that Federer would struggle to get past either Tsonga or Fish. Meanwhile, Nadal was in lousy form and would undoubtedly face Ferrer in the quarterfinals, whereas no force on earth would stall Djokovic, apart from his right shoulder.

Six weeks ago, the odds on this semifinal composition were 5-1, conceivably the shortest in history (I really have no way of knowing). This was just prior to the US Open Series' commencement, and it speaks volumes for the clarity of thinking

wrought by a long perspective. It suggests that all the sound and fury since the Series got under way has signified little, a cacophony serving only to scramble our judgement. All of these disparate narratives, all that weather, all that drama with burned fingers, and bung shoulders, and early losses and losses to big hitters, all the decline and the pressure and questionable motivation. And where do we end up? Exactly where we did at the French Open, and almost where we ended up in Melbourne and London. It also means that only twice this year has someone outside the top four progressed to a major semifinal: Ferrer in Melbourne, and Tsonga at Wimbledon. I suspect that is unprecedented, and only signals that the statistical domination by the top four shows no sign of lessening, more proof that tyrants never tire of tyranny.

If the serfs are to stage an uprising, it is hard to see who will lead it. Soderling has glandular fever, Monfils is a headcase and Berdych is a robot. Roddick is clearly angling for a post-tennis career in the media. Consider this: across this season at the majors there have been 16 semifinal slots available, and these have been filled by only six different players. Meanwhile, there have also been 16 losing quarterfinalist slots, and every time it has been a different person, and that outside of the top four, only one player has progressed to the final eight more than once (Tsonga at Wimbledon and the US Open). The gap between the Big Four and the rest has become a chasm.

Nonetheless, treating the top four as a unit should not carry the implication that they are necessarily equal. After all, Murray has never won a major, and Djokovic has hardly lost all year. Nadal would appear to have Federer's number, and yet has never beaten Murray at a hardcourt major. Federer beat Djokovic in Paris, but lost to him in Melbourne. It is therefore anyone's guess how this weekend will play out, although the odds are favouring a Djokovic - Nadal final.

A few further points to divert us: This will be the fourth consecutive year that Federer and Djokovic will meet in the US Open semifinals, with Federer leading 2-1. If Federer falls in the semifinals and Murray takes the title, the Scot will take over the No.3 ranking. That is the only outcome that will see a rankings change. If Federer and Nadal progress to the final, it will be the ninth time they have contested a major final, but the first time they will meet at the US Open. If Nadal wins it all, this will be

the first time he has defended a hardcourt title. If Djokovic wins, it will be his first US Open title, and he will become the third active player to claim three majors in a season, which used to be considered a rare feat. If Andy Murray wins, Britain will go bananas, and he may even crack a smile.

Favouring the Brave

US Open, Semifinals

(1) Djokovic d. (3) Federer, 6/7 4/6 6/3 6/2 7/5

Roger Federer was defeated in the US Open semifinals after leading two sets to love, the second time he has lost from that position in as many majors, and the fourth time ever. However, the inevitable comparisons to his loss at Wimbledon will be as misleading as they are tempting. Insofar as comparing two tennis matches yields much interest at all - and Federer is generally among the first to declare it doesn't - the true precedent lies in the nearly identical match between the same men at the same stage of the same tournament almost exactly a year ago, a match in which Novak Djokovic eventually saved two match points, before going on to break Federer and serve out the match 7/5. To be fair, no one has been slow in making this comparison, either. The attractive thesis is that today's loss thus draws together the two prominent threads of the great man's decline, but why that should be important is hard to explain. In other words: so what?

If we look at the two matches, the similarities quickly pile up, but they still don't amount to much. If we swap sets two and three today, the two matches are all but identical, both featuring Federer playing over Djokovic to claim a couple sets, and going down early breaks in a couple of others while the Serb lifted. Once again, it took until the fifth set for both men to play well at the same time. Djokovic blinked first, Federer took the break at 4/3, and stepped up to serve (last year he never served for the match). He moved to 40-15, and Djokovic nodded in recognition of this moment, his old concession - lately subsumed - that Federer just has his number. Federer played it safe, opting for a slider, but one that lack slide and width. Djokovic read it, swung as hard as he could, and produced the forehand of the year. Federer's

next matchpoint vanished in a mid-court forehand that found the tape. The margins at this level are minute, but the better player usually still wins, somehow.

For all that something occurring once is meaningless –*einmal ist keinmal*, after all - the idea that twice therefore matters doesn't necessarily follow. Federer lost but he was obviously good enough to win, which more or less vindicates his assertion that he remains capable of claiming majors. Djokovic won, but very nearly lost, and will still go into Monday's final as the favourite. All of this was known yesterday, and by restaging last year's semifinal they have proved nothing either way. I suppose this is just a long way of saying that I don't quite know what to make of it, and that I suspect that the wrong conclusions will be drawn. If Federer was a business, there would be an entire parasite industry based around analysing these supposed patterns in performance, and thereafter recommending sweeping structural reform. The conceit of spectators - and by extension journalists - is not far away. This is why Federer was invited repeatedly in his press conference to ruminate on the things he might have done differently, as though these are lessons that might come in handy when he and Djokovic next go 7/5 in the fifth in a US Open semifinal. He disdained to speculate, as he always does, knowing that even were the situation to arise again, there's no reason to think it will play out like that. He was careful to praise Djokovic, but did admit that he didn't quite understand Djokovic's thinking in going for that forehand on 40-15 down. He suggested the forehand was 'lucky', which is predictably and depressingly the sound bite fated to endure.

The thing is, Djokovic happily conceded the forehand was lucky long before Federer did. It was in that part of the post-match interview before he started dancing with the crowd. Honestly, it was lucky, but that doesn't disqualify it from being an exceptional shot. You still have to be brave enough to attempt it, and good enough to hit it. Saying it is lucky hardly contradicts Djokovic's later elaboration that 'I took my chances, and I hit it very clean'. It can be lucky and gutsy, brilliant and heart-breaking. It can be, and it was.

(2) Nadal d. (4) Murray, 6/4 6/2 3/6 6/2

Half-soused by the drama of the first semifinal, there was little chance the second match would thrill the crowd more than any other hangover. That little chance wilted

to nothing under the baleful glare of Andy Murray, who apparently had a bone to pick with all 23,200 people in attendance, but particularly with the ne'er-do-wells infesting his player's box. I imagine he'd be an angry, angry drunk. The first two sets were a sour and fuming effort even by his standards, the kind of self-consuming slow-burn that he usually reserves for finals. He was down two sets to love in only a fraction of the time it took Federer and Djokovic to get through four sets: about eleven eighths. It was frankly a bummer.

Murray harnessed his rage more usefully in the third set, for a time overwhelming Nadal in a manner that would surely prove an issue for the Spaniard if it might only be sustained. Of course, it couldn't. It lasted just over a set, after which point Murray returned to berating those loved ones who had dared show their faces, muttering mordantly unfunny asides to himself behind the baseline, and getting passed at the net. If the first semifinal was a divine comedy, the second was the tragedy of character-as-destiny, although this was - classically-speaking - a kind of comedy, too. So long as Murray wasn't shouting directly at you, it was even kind of funny.

Wholly Sam Stosur

US Open, Women's Final

(9) Stosur d. (28) S. Williams, 6/2 6/3

I don't usually post about women's tennis - entirely because I don't know enough about the players, and it always pays to limit your scope - but I have to congratulate Sam Stosur on winning her first major title, and becoming the first Australian woman to claim a Grand Slam in 31 years. Here in Melbourne, the mood is pretty upbeat.

It was the most composed performance I have ever seen from her, especially when she was leading, which is her usual cue to go haywire. Given how poorly she performed in last year's French Open final as the overwhelming favourite, you'd have to imagine today's unfettered shot making owed a great deal to her underdog status. Playing Serena Williams in New York on the 11th of September was always going to be tough, but one had to imagine that however daunted she felt, the pressure on Williams was going to be comparable.

And so it proved. Stosur produced an immaculate first set, with her strangely effective forehand - does it have *any* backswing? - and vicious kick-serve scoring heavily, and her sliced backhand drawing errors from a sluggish opponent. The match turned at the beginning of the second - sadly, this will be the prevailing memory - with Williams serving, down break points. She saved the first with a typically muscular ace, and then the second, but carelessly screamed 'Come on' before her winning forehand had reached Stosur's side of the court. Stosur laid her racquet on it, and the umpire had little choice but to invoke the hindrance rule. You aren't allowed to shout stuff out during a point, especially when your opponent is about to hit the ball. Actually, the umpire did have a choice, but rightly chose to impose a point penalty. Stosur thus claimed the break, and Williams, true to form, dropped her bundle.

Her consequent harangue of the umpire - Eva Asderakia - was not particularly creative even by her own low standards, although it was sufficiently threatening to warrant further investigation. Even Dick Enberg in the commentary box disapproved, with William's outrage that that the umpire would seek to curtail her self-expression - 'I'm an American!' - felt to be in particularly poor taste, on today of all days. She also told the umpire she was 'unattractive on the inside', a 'hater', and if they ever found themselves alone in a corridor, she 'had 'better look the other way'. She asked if Asderakia was 'the one who screwed me over last time', suggesting that her display of contrition after the last episode was as false as it sounded.

The unfortunate upshot was that it distracted Stosur at precisely the moment it fired up Williams and the crowd. The Australian remarked afterwards that 'I felt the noise kind of go right through my chest.' Thereafter followed a few desperate games, in which the American expressed herself freely. By the seventh game, however, Williams had cooled somewhat, and Stosur broke, and then held in imperious fashion. Given her history of gagging while serving out sets and matches, she was right to attack her opponent's next service game. Playing with house money, she fought to two match points, which were yesterday proven to not necessarily be enough. The first was saved. Then, for the second time in two days, a scorching forehand winner return proved definitive on a match point. It was in, and Stosur had won. Her smile was endless.

Asked at the trophy presentation whether winning a Slam felt like she thought it would, she replied that yeah, it pretty much did. I'm largely immune to patriotism, but the bluntness of her assessment was winsomely Australian. I don't know that much about women's tennis, but I know that it was also wholly Sam Stosur.

Never In Doubt

US Open, Final

(1) Djokovic d. (2) Nadal, 6/2 6/4 6/7 6/1

When Rafael Nadal opened today's US Open final by breaking Novak Djokovic with the utmost belligerence and moving to a two games to nothing lead, the writing was on the wall: *'Yo te aplastará!'* it proclaimed. *You will be crushed!* Sadly, Djokovic commands little Spanish, and was thus less intimidated than he might have been had his command of that fine tongue been more accomplished. Ignorant of the peril he was apparently in, the top seed went on to claim the next six games, sealing the first set in a touch over three hours.

Incensed that his warning had gone unheeded - and uncomprehended - in the first set, Nadal ominously repeated himself at the commencement of the second. Again he moved to a two game lead. Once more the message was clear: *'Upon subsequent consideration, now I will crush you!'* For no clear reason, it was now scrawled in Catalan, and so Djokovic was again less cowed than perplexed. He shook his head, set to work, and only four hours later, claimed the second set. There was a lot of running.

Vague and poly-linguistic threats aside, the pattern of those opening sets was clear, and clearly revealed that for all Nadal's recent chatter about working out how to play Djokovic, he hasn't come up with anything useful yet. Hopefully 'serve poorly' wasn't his new secret weapon, although who is to say, given that his strategy back in Rome was 'junk-balls to the service line', guaranteeing a broadly similar result. Most notable today was Nadal's unwillingness to occupy his backhand corner, usually a second-home. How many times in the last seven years have we watched him dance nimbly around to unload on his forehand, inside out *and* in? The issue for Nadal is

that doing so opens up his forehand corner, and that unless his forehand is a monster, Djokovic will probably reach the ball, and, remaining balanced even at the uttermost stretch, launch it into the open court. Thus constrained, Nadal remained shackled to the centre of the baseline, which inevitably brought his far weaker backhand into play. Djokovic saw to *that*. For all that their rallies - their endless, impossibly physical and brilliant rallies - varied considerably from point to point, each at its core had Nadal fending the Serbian off his backhand. (For Federer fans, there was doubtless an almost karmic satisfaction to be gained from watching it unfold this way.) It revealed just how little control Nadal has over the depth on his two-hander, and how his slice, even at its best, does little more than neutralise the opponent. For great swathes of the match, the Spaniard's forehand - among the most feared in the sport - was only brought into play if and when Djokovic allowed it.

The integrity of these patterns began to collapse in the third set, largely because Nadal saw how irretrievably proceedings were heading south. Compelled to change things up, he changed them up. True, he didn't start serve-volleying - to do would have been equivalent to requesting Djokovic stop beating him with the butt of his rifle, and just shoot him - but he did grow more daring. Caution was hurled windward, and Nadal set out to dictate the points. It was a vast effort, among the most exacting and courageous I have seen from this most courageous of players, and all it allowed him to do was level-peg with the world No.1. Then, at 5/5, Djokovic broke anyway, and after only 12 hours of play, he stepped up to serve for the most meandering of straight sets victories. To his credit, Nadal sustained his attack. Djokovic tightened, the Spaniard broke back, and they moved to a tiebreak. The crowd were deafening, and Nadal was suddenly untouchable. Suddenly all the forehands were monsters, and he romped to the set.

The fourth set was a strange affair . . . but not really. Constrained by a slightly-tweaked back, Djokovic began to attack everything. The first few sets had been savage, but the physicality had owed a lot to the native caution of the players. Now, finally driven to it, Djokovic was actually playing hardcourt tennis, flattening out his drives and aiming for the lines. Nadal, spent from his earlier toil, was no longer fast enough. The final set blowout is not an unusual phenomenon in best of five matches. (It felt very much like the French Open final, when Federer grew unplayable in taking

the third set, only to muster little resistance in the fourth.) After 19 straight hours on court, the writing was on the wall once more, but this time it was in English, and plain for all to see: 'The end is nigh.' Nadal was done, and Djokovic had done the unthinkable.

Novak Djokovic now holds the Australian Open, Wimbledon and US Open titles, and was only a couple of matches from taking the French. He has also claimed five Masters titles, and a few others. He has lost two matches for the year, one a retirement. He is approximately a million points clear of the field at No.1, and can no longer be stopped from finishing the year in that position, even if he doesn't hit another ball. He has defeated Nadal and Federer a combined ten times for the year, and today became just the second man to beat both in a single major. Surely, the Federer Era is over. Some might wonder if the Djokovic Era has truly begun, but, really we should more usefully ask how it might possibly end.

The Right of Might

The last major of 2011 is done with, which for a vast proportion of tennis fans ostensibly concludes the tennis season itself. The truly committed - or those merely facing commitment - of course know otherwise, since the Asian swing and the European indoors beckon, and even casual fans have presumably heard of Davis Cup, even if they don't care unless their country is involved. Come to that we must, but first, some scattered thoughts on issues that have outlived this year's US Open.

The two topics destined to linger are naturally Novak Djokovic's continued dominance, and his improbable victory over Roger Federer in the semifinals. Fascinating though these are - and they have been and will continue to be discussed here and elsewhere at soporific length - this year's US Open inadvertently promoted a couple of other pressing issues to the fore. The first concerns the Open itself, and whether a fourth successive Monday men's final will finally see off the frantic, unfair if admittedly great-value Super Saturday 'tradition'. Money, sadly, talks, and so far it has talked louder than common sense, which in real-world terms means that CBS's broadcast interests have thus far trumped the contention that forcing the men to play

best-of-five semifinals the day before the final was a pretty tough ask, especially for the second pair. Inevitably, if either or both of the semifinals go the distance, the final will prove a perfunctory affair. Super Saturday guarantees a Sub-par Sunday.

Abetting this outcome, the tournament's first round is spread over three days, thereby leaving no cushion at the back end of the tournament. Lacking a roof, the tournament schedule thus goes haywire the moment inclement weather intrudes. Inclement weather has intruded for four straight years - thus the Monday finals, which surely don't help CBS's ratings - owing in part to altered climate patterns that have shifted hurricane season to the start of September. Common sense dictates that the early rounds are dispensed with as quickly as possible, that the men get a day off before the final, and that the USTA builds a roof. Financial realities dictate that CBS is entitled to maximum value for their product - which is the last two rounds - and that putting a roof on Arthur Ashe stadium would be prohibitively expensive even if it was possible. That said, I'd be surprised if the schedule at least wasn't dragged back nearer sanity next year.

The second issue highlighted by this year's US Open was that of 'precautionary' retirements, whereby a player would fall prey to an injury that wasn't serious enough to stop him playing, but that he felt was serious enough to stop him winning. There was a time when this inspired a player to simply go for broke. Fabio Fognini demonstrated this principle to superb effect at Roland Garros, when he couldn't move but he could swing, so he swung, and somehow won. Now, however, the player apparently can't give up fast enough. Tsonga provided a succinct demonstration in Montreal, as did Djokovic in Cincinnati, and it is a bad business. Most relevantly to the Open was Janko Tipsarevic's withdrawal in the quarterfinals, when, following two tight sets he sustained an injury to his thigh, checked out for a set and a half, and then gave up entirely halfway through the fourth. In all three cases - and there have been others - the player was fit to perform the following week, his capacity in no way reduced. Tipsarevic is listed to play Juan Martin del Potro in Serbia's Davis Cup tie against Argentina tomorrow.

It seems to me that the ATP's 'lack of best effort' rule at least deserves perusal, since nowhere does it concede that 'A player shall use his best efforts during the match when competing in a tournament, *unless he feels he can't win or can't*

otherwise be arsed.' And nor does it include a provision for withdrawing from an event because the one next week means more to you. Arguably, Djokovic's US Open win vindicates his decision to withdraw from the Cincinnati final, unless you had paid to attend the Cincinnati final, or you believe that there is a measure of right and wrong that supersedes the facile assumption that ends justify means. Rules exist to preserve this distinction, but not if they aren't applied.

Davis Cup (Semifinals)

Are You Not Entertained?

Davis Cup semifinals are upon us, as are the World Group playoffs, both promising a measure of redemption for a team event that has so far this year produced little excitement. Frankly, 2011 has been a bummer, but the ties this weekend hold some promise, although I suppose they always do. Prior to a tie commencing, that's about all you can ask for, even as disappointment invariably follows. Why are these things almost never as exciting as you'd hope? Thinking on it, I suppose that's true for all sports, mirroring life.

World Group Semifinals

Spain 2 - France 0

Argentina 2 - Serbia 0

Both semifinals sit at 2-0, meaning that in both cases today's doubles could complete a rout. In the case of Spain leading a depleted France - no Monfils, and Tsonga operating at reduced capacity - this is hardly surprising. The production is being staged in a broiling and dusty bullring in Cordoba that looks like an extravagant movie set, which was to be expected given the degree to which the entire affair has been carefully scripted both to intimidate the visitors, and to inspire Rafael Nadal. Though surely wearied beyond measure from his fruitless exertions in New York, it has apparently worked. Striding manfully through a climactic scene from *Gladiator*, and incarnating a Spaniard even more convincingly than Russel Crowe did, Nadal was focussed and merciless. Into this cauldron of virulent and macho patriotism ambled Richard Gasquet and Gilles Simon, a couple of diminutive and scruffy hobos looking for all the world like extras who'd wandered onto the wrong set. At least Monfils and Tsonga, muscled and magnificent athletes, would have matched the utterly martial vibe, even if they might not have altered the result. As it was, the crowd was rapidly whipped to a lathered frenzy by a home team that conceded only ten games across two rubbers. A full-strength French team might have eked out a set, but the overall result would have been the same. Today's doubles might be a classic, and worthy of the venue, but Spain will not lose the weekend.

Meanwhile in Belgrade, Novak Djokovic - wearied beyond measure by his fruitful exertions in New York - opted out at the eleventh hour, foolishly presuming that Tipsarevic and Troicki could surely get the job done against Argentina. Or perhaps he didn't presume anything, but wanted to rest. As it happened, he was either wrong or affirmed in his disinterest when his compatriots managed a lone set between them, succumbing meekly to Nalbandian and del Potro. The defending champions cling on the brink of defeat. Nalbandian famously values the Davis Cup more than any other prize - although any comparable prize is frankly beyond his means - and so it's hard to see Argentina losing from here, although, if Serbia wins the doubles, the Djoker will remain the Djokovic in the pack.

World Group Play-offs

Australia 1 - Switzerland 1

Israel 1 - Canada 1

A world away from Serbian stadiums and Spanish bullrings, the World Group play-off tie between Australia and Switzerland is apparently being conducted in someone's backyard, right down to the grass-court, which is delightfully old-school: lightning-slick, uneven and low-bouncing enough to satisfy any purist. Having said that, the purists would have looked on in dismay as Bernard Tomic and Stanislas Wawrinka evoked a by-gone era, recalling a pair of second-grade baseliners at Wimbledon in the seventies. Tomic, in particular, looked as ever like a throwback to the times when even pros could be self-taught, although it's hard to deny his effectiveness on grass. The more inconsistent the surface, the greater the challenge he poses. Wawrinka at least ventured to the net from time to time - he is a fine volleyer - although not as frequently as he chose to dump forehands into the net. On a fast surface with variable bounce, technical flaws (like not watching the ball) become exposed. The Swiss No.2 looked increasingly hopeless and frustrated as the match wore on, and, as many others have, eventually failed the Tomic Test. There is little doubt that the Australian team's overall strategy relies heavily on the surface and Wawrinka, for all that Roger Federer is present. I suspect the home team have more or less conceded any single match involving Federer - although Hewitt gave a mighty account of himself - given that the surface so suits his immense variety and wonderful serve.

But you would have to favour Hewitt over Wawrinka, which means that today's doubles might prove decisive.

The tie is being conducted in a tremendously laid-back fashion, one not owing solely to the intimacy of the venue. Pat Rafter, ensconced court-side, could only look more relaxed if they gave him a rocking chair and a quilt for his legs, a stark contrast to Albert Costa and Guy Forget, who each spent most of their matches rocketing up out of their seats, in order to gesticulate wildly with less impediment. Federer and Hewitt have been engaged in a mutual-affection exercise for some days. The most touching moments were surprisingly supplied by Tomic, who remarked after his win that he'd opened so nervously because his idol Federer was sitting court-side, and that when they contest the reverse singles on Sunday: 'I just pray he doesn't like my game. If he likes it, I'm screwed.'

The atmosphere was rather more heated in Ramat Hasharon - which I gather is in Tel Aviv - where Israel is hosting Canada. Unless you're specifically interested in the Davis Cup fortunes of either country - full disclosure: I'm not - the main interest in this tie resides in the return of Milos Raonic after hip surgery, and that his first opponent back was everyone's favourite pro-tennis blogger Amir Weintraub. Israel's No.1 Dudi Sela dropped the opening rubber in a savage five hour upset to Vasek Pospisil, and there was a widespread anticipation that Raonic would serve his way to a 2-0 lead. On his 25th birthday, Weintraub surprised everyone by lifting magnificently and winning in four sets. Word is that the entire crowd sang Happy Birthday to him afterwards. This is what Davis Cup is all about.

Suitably Absurd

World Group Semifinals

Spain 4 - France 1

Argentina 3 - Serbia 2

The finalists for the 2011 Davis Cup have been decided, and Argentina will meet Spain, in Spain. That climactic tie is still several months away, in early December, though we can safely assume David Nalbandian's preparations are already

underway, since - like Lleyton Hewitt - he thinks nothing of forgoing vast chunks of the season to better ready himself. Of the six or so major accomplishments in the men's game, winning the Davis Cup is among the five that have thus far eluded him, and he has lately taken to claiming it as the one that means the most. Given that he can barely last consecutive tour events without requiring surgery, it'll be interesting to see how lightly he takes the rest of the year, which will mostly be played indoors, in cities where he has enjoyed his greatest success.

Argentina reached the final by defeating Serbia, who are the defending champions. The vibe was established early when Nalbandian saw off Viktor Troicki with little trouble, and was sustained easily when Juan Martin del Potro allowed Janko Tipsarevic no sets, displaying the ferocity his fans had been expecting on the US hardcourts. Serbia won the doubles, but the real drama came at the commencement of Day Three, when Novak Djokovic took to the court, following a team decision to protect Troicki from del Potro. Djokovic was wounded and weary, but 'my team felt at 50 or 60 per cent I would play better than Viktor'. A real vote of confidence, bearing in mind that Troicki is not injured, and is ranked No.16 in the world, one spot above del Potro. Still, given the way the Argentine was playing, their caution appeared justified, although it turned out Djokovic erred badly in taking the court. He lost the first set in a tiebreak, and then, as the second set got underway, he collapsed to the court, and would not rise. His back had gone, and he has suffered his third loss of the year, and second through retirement. Given the tears he shed afterwards, this one was rather more genuine than the last. There was a perfunctory dead fifth rubber, which also ended prematurely with a retirement (this time Juan Monaco).

World Group Play-offs

Russia 3 - Brazil 2

Switzerland 3 - Australia 2

The 2011 Davis Cup has through its initial rounds proved lamentably short on drama, and so it is with some pleasure that I note that Djokovic's collapse was merely the third most dramatic thing to happen today. As ever, when in doubt, turn to the veterans. Mikhail Youzhny won the Davis Cup final for Russia nine years ago, recovering from two sets down to beat Paul Henri Mathieu in the live fifth rubber, in France. Today's win over Thomaz Bellucci wasn't quite in that league. Youzhny

failed to serve out the match at 5/4 in fifth, saved a couple of match points, and then took it 14/12. Russian tennis has fallen on hard times, but they will return to the World Group.

As will Switzerland. Understandably and predictably, the Australian team's approach to this tie was to contain Roger Federer, and to focus their attacks on the far more vulnerable Stanislas Wawrinka. Neither Bernard Tomic nor Lleyton Hewitt was likely to upset Federer, even or especially on grass, although certainly neither would have refused a win had it been proffered. The upshot was that for the home team to claim the tie, they would have to take the doubles, no small task against the reigning Olympic gold medallists. Adapting Peter Fleming's formulation about John McEnroe, the widespread belief is that the best doubles team in the world is Roger Federer and anyone, but the Australian duo of Hewitt and Chris Guccione set about confounding the idea that one man can constitute a team. Federer was excellent, but the Australians were, too, and Wawrinka was much, much worse.

Day Three dawned with a moribund Swiss team writing themselves off at the merest prompt. Federer would probably even the tie against Tomic, but they equally knew that Wawrinka on prevailing form stood little chance against Hewitt, whose year had been leading to this and little else. In the end, of course, Wawrinka lifted mightily, bad light intervened, the Australians complained a lot, everyone returned this morning, played one more game, Hewitt broke himself, the Swiss won the tie, and the Australians complained some more. It was tremendous entertainment, and a suitably absurd end to the most engaging Davis Cup weekend in years.

The Asian Swing (September – October)

Low Ebb

And so we have arrived at that point in the season when even hardcore tennis fans – a term historically synonymous with larcenists and false witnesses - find the sport hard to follow, unless they find themselves mired in Metz or stranded in Bucharest for whatever reason. The Davis Cup semifinals effectively drained whatever scant reserves remained after the US Open, leaving us groaningly prostrate on the floor. I suspect I'm not the only one whose determination to follow the continuing adventures of, say, Juan Ignacio Chela is at a low ebb.

Insofar as it gives us something coherent to look forward to, the ATP's Asian Swing initiative can be considered a success, but that won't commence until next week, and, unlike last year, it is doubtful whether a player of Rafael Nadal's calibre will be gracing Bangkok. (For starters, he's pretty dinged up. Secondly, his unlikely semifinal exit to Guillermo Garcia-Lopez from last year's event - in which he blew no fewer than four thousand break points in the second set - probably retains some dire juju.) Anyway, even these meagre offerings are a week away, which makes the profound incongruity of this week's events in France and Romania - really, clay? - even harder to fathom, and almost impossible to get aroused by.

With that in mind, and conceding that for most people the season has more or less ended - tennis will flash briefly back into consciousness for the Tour Finals and the Davis Cup finale - it's worth looking at what the rest of the year holds. What are the things to look out for, the narratives to follow? While there are no more majors, that doesn't mean the top players cease playing, even if some of them will not emerge from their palaces for some time yet. There is also a host of players for whom the slick lurid indoor courts of Europe represent the most attractive part of the season. And of course, there are the incomparable trophies, each its own lavish monument to kitsch.

The most notable thing we *won't* be seeing, at least until Basel or even Paris, is the world No.1. Novak Djokovic has a muscle tear in his rib, and will remain absent for at least a month. I think he's getting married or something as well. Apparently Andy

Murray will be his best man. Does anyone else find it jarring the way top players refer to each other in the press by their last names, even when they are close friends? Thus Djokovic calls Murray 'Murray' in his press conferences. Try referring to your closest friends by their surname for a day, and see how it feels. In any case, 'Djokovic' will be back just in time for the World Tour Finals. Winning at the O2 Arena will be a tough assignment without adequate match play, although this was a trick Federer used to pull.

Speaking of Federer, he will be the one to watch, since, probably for the first time ever, he finds himself in the position of having to defend fistfuls of points at the end of the season, courtesy of the sustained tear he went on last year upon hiring Paul Annacone. This run gained him three titles and over 3,000 points, but means that he has far more at stake than anyone else as 2011 grinds down. Of course, he won the Tour Finals in spectacular fashion in 2010, defeating Nadal, Djokovic, Soderling, Ferrer and Murray for the loss of a single set. If he doesn't match that, there is a reasonable chance he will end the season at a modest No.4, although this will depend on Murray's performance.

Of course, 'depend on Murray' is a phrase that should see only ironic deployment. I don't want to imagine what will happen if he is in charge of organising the stripper for Djokovic's bachelor party. (Actually I lie; imagining mishaps involving strippers is always worth the effort.) Other things to look forward to:

- The dusted pink and purple court of Basel.
- Players entering the court accompanied by naff theme music and light shows.
- Delighting at whichever Frenchman brings the Paris Indoors to life.
- Finding out whether Diego Maradona will again grace the O2 Arena, and if so, whether he will still have a cameraman assigned to finding him in the crowd.
- Discovering whether David Nalbandian will realise his purportedly boyhood dream of winning the Davis Cup, on clay, against Spain, in Spain.
- Whether the crowd in Shanghai remains as maniacally excitable as last years, when they gasped and hooted at every let, ball boy stumble or stray seagull.

A Long Time Coming

Bucharest, Final

(2) Mayer d. (4) Andujar, 6/3 6/1

I first heard about Florian Mayer from my father earlier in the decade before this one. Sometime late in the year - perhaps 2004 - the evening well-advanced, Dad was aroused from his couch-bound slumber to discover the television showing one of those interminable indoors events infesting the back end of the season. There was a young and curiously bird-like German on court, with an awkward technique and lousy smile. This was one to watch, Dad subsequently warned me, and so I watched him. I agreed his technique was weird, and that he might well amount to *something*. He would surely win a title, and maybe reach the top 20. But Federer was happening all around us, and although the Swiss was proving that anything was possible, he was making it clear that it was only possible for him and his mates. Players like Mayer became part of the background, bulking out the *mise-en-scene*, providing the biomass over which the top players would roll on their way to glory. He never amounted to much more, and by 2008, when he fell to an injury-inspired 350-odd in the rankings, he was amounting to less and less.

Since then the certainty that Florian Mayer was destined to win an ATP title has ebbed and flowed more or less in lockstep with the vagaries of his career, although it is ironic that even as his ranking has soared to a career-high of late, that maiden title was looking less and less inevitable. Before today he had lost four tour-level finals. After today, he still has, but now he has a win to offset them.

He did it on clay, which shouldn't really be his best surface, but always kind of has been. You would think his game would work on grass, and on fast indoor courts, and it's hard to say that it doesn't, but even harder to say what his game actually is. It tends to be called 'funky', and he is sometimes compared to Fabrice Santoro. But he isn't funky the way Bernard Tomic is, though Mayer does share the younger player's tendency to attempt an unexpected shot in lieu of an effective one. The comparison to Santoro is equally misleading, since the German is considerably more orthodox, until he isn't. With Santoro it was all weird, all the time. Mayer's rallies tend to putter along comfortably, until he suddenly leaps into a double-handed drop-shot from

behind the baseline. You can't teach that . . . at least, not legally. Today he proved far too able for Pablo Andujar, who didn't play very well. Indeed, the Spaniard played too poorly even to be put off by Mayer's technique, since in order to be put off you must be at least a little bit on. From 3/1 up in the first set, he won only one game, and he barely deserved it.

If, seven years ago, Dad had asked me to name the year and location of Mayer's first title, I can say with total certainty that I would have come up with something sooner than 2011 and somewhere other than Bucharest. Still, it's what weeks and tournaments like this are for. Even more strikingly, it is what years like this are for. 2011 has witnessed no fewer than nine new titlists, one of whom was Andujar. (None of them have been Janko Tipsarevic.) Technically speaking, Bucharest is not part of the European indoor circuit, largely because it is a clay event played outdoors. This means that, sadly for Mayer, his first ATP trophy is not an eternal outrage against good taste. Metz, however, *is* an indoor event, and it did not disappoint.

Tender Maulings

Bangkok, First Round

(1) Murray d. Bye

Following a few brief weeks in which Andy Murray played little and complained a lot - endeavouring to draw from that vast well of public sympathy replenished whenever multi-millionaire athletes cry poor - he has turned up as the top seed at the PTT Thailand Open in Bangkok. Given the paucity of top talent in the draw, one imagines he is a certainty to win it, but really, given his recent comments, I suspect it isn't a title he truly covets. He has earned plenty just by showing up.

Nowhere is it reliably disclosed just how much the top players make in appearance fees, but it is known to be significant, in the order of hundreds of thousands of dollars, an amount that can exceed the winner's prize at smaller 250 events. Murray of course will not reveal just how much it took to entice him to Thailand this week. He has lately decried the mandatory nature of the Masters 1000 events, since these tournaments are under no compulsion to offer appearance fees to top players, who

are obliged to turn up anyway. He also complained that there are no easy matches at the Masters, thus both getting the point and missing it simultaneously. The quality of the match-ups is why the Masters 1000s are the ATP's premiere products. For those of us following the game, good matches are really the *thing*. We *like* them. Sadly, the irony is that the events so often fail to live up to their potential, although this irony is eclipsed by the fact that the Masters 1000 format is precisely where Murray made a name for himself. He's won seven of them, and as far as I can tell he has made some decent money doing so.

Murray is due at the Shanghai Masters in a couple weeks, there to defend the title he won in such ferocious fashion last year, utterly mauling Federer in the final. Tender from more recent maulings, Federer is not showing up this year, and neither is Djokovic. Nadal remains on the entry list, but given his exertions of late there is every chance he will be a no-show, too. If that transpires, the responsibility will fall to Murray that the tournament does not fall to someone outside of the anointed top four, who have won all but one of these events going back to March last year, or 13 of the last 14. Given that one of those four always wins, it's hard to believe that the match-ups are really all that savage, at least until they have to face each other. If Murray retains his title, he will move to within striking distance of Federer in the rankings. He will also earn about \$88,000 per day, although this assumes a seven day tournament.

If it goes longer, Murray will presumably demand more cash. Among his more questionable recent contentions was the idea that if the US Open was to begin a day earlier, then the players should be paid more, for the extra day of work. Assuming that the extra day would not require anyone to play an extra round, I can't quite see what he's getting at. He would still need to win seven matches to take the title, or, more accurately in Murray's case, six matches in order to reach the final and fold dismally. These guys aren't on a wage.

Murray's assault on the Bangkok title began with a bye, for which he will pocket a touch over \$6,000.

Swingers

Bangkok, Quarterfinals

(1) Murray d. Dimitrov, 6/4 6/4

The 2011 Asian Swing is only four days old, but already I've decided I can't stand the term. Perhaps I should be clearer. The Asian part is fine. Indeed, I cannot fault it for accuracy. But 'Swing', that's just fucking horrible, another example of that lazy dullard-speak that has crept into the sport, and should creep out again. Sadly, the opportunity for a less stupid alternative to gain currency has passed, and so we're probably stuck with it. Various parts of the season are now 'swings', which presumably makes the players involved swingers. Nicolas Almagro won the so-called Golden Swing back in February, thereby earning the title Golden Swinger. There was even a trophy.

Anyhow, tonight's match was officiated by Mohamed Lahyani, puckish and smirking as always. It was a pleasure to see him again, with his characteristic lack of solemnity for any occasion that leaves him open to the charge of being merely frivolous from the merely humourless. (On that note, I cannot remember him officiating any of Andy Roddick's matches, or at least, none of the ones where Roddick goes ungovernably bananas. Roddick's wit is renowned - those with no frame of reference rank him with Voltaire - but he cannot abide to have others' wit directed his way, least of all on the court, and especially when things aren't going his way. The capacity to take a joke relies upon maintaining a sense of proportion, and when Roddick loses it this is inevitably the first thing to go. The twinkle in Lahyani's eye would be a red rag to a bull.)

There were no gored officials today. Andy Murray is more inclined to snarl at his player's box or himself than at the umpire, and in any case it never came to that, since he was never in much real trouble, and because it's only Bangkok. He'd prefer to win, assuredly - a title is a title - but he had less riding on the outcome than Dimitrov.

Dimitrov has a lot riding on this because, as 2011 winds down, he is running out of time to post the breakthrough win that he was ordained to make. Even amongst his

peers he is considered the talented one. But almost all of the others - barring Berankis - have broken through to some degree. Dolgoplov, Raonic and Sweeting have claimed maiden titles, Tomic had Wimbledon, and Donald Young appears to be building on his US Open form. Meanwhile Dimitrov's best moments this year have mostly looked like tonight, when he played Murray reasonably close, entertained greatly, and folded meekly when he needed to be tough. At 4/4 in each set he produced a poor game, and was broken. The second time, he smashed his racquet with, as Robbie Koenig might say, considerable aplomb. It finally brought the crowd alive, but it was too late for Dimitrov. Is it too late for 2011?

It's All Gravy

Kuala Lumpur, Final

Tipsarevic d. Baghdatis, 6/4 7/5

Janko Tipsarevic was, until earlier today, the most notorious player in men's tennis to have never won a title, a rankling accolade even in lean times, but surely gougingly painful in a year that has thus far produced nine first-time champions. Even Florian Mayer was in on the action. Tipsarevic dutifully insisted that his lack of a maiden title meant nothing - the mating cry of the perennial also-ran - that as long as he was winning and earning, that was all that mattered. We could say that he was merely seeking to lessen the burden of expectation on himself, but it is hard to imagine that he believed what he was saying, either. Did anyone? Bemused and sceptical pundits wavered momentarily. Were we merely imagining that sturdy monkey perched on the Serbian's back, the one that gouged its claws deep whenever a title seemed within reach, the one that did for him at Del Ray, and crippled him in Eastbourne? It looked crushingly ingratescent, that expanding ape, but according to the man himself it was scarcely noticeable, and easily preferable to lugging around trophies, which is notoriously dangerous work.

After Tipsarevic had contrived to serve out the match - it took multiple forays, courtesy of a belatedly-dogged opponent, and the ceaseless ministrations of that monkey - it suddenly seemed as though titles were all the thing. Overwhelmed,

Tipsarevic sounded like George Costanza promising his secretary a raise at the point of orgasm. First he promised Baghdatis a certain return to the top ten. Then he guaranteed the tournament itself that 500 status was merely a matter of time. Just so it is clear, neither of things lie within Tipsarevic's new-found power to grant.

My stream went dead before Baghdatis could offer a rejoinder, although he was clearly in the mood to. Interviewed first, the Cypriot endured the formulaic blandishments with reasonable grace, but when the interviewer remarked on his wonderful season, he wasn't about to let that slide: 'Actually, I've had a terrible season.' This inspired a throw-me-a-bone-here routine from the lady with the mic, and Baghdatis looked disconsolate and bone-weary and bored from having to engage with this crap at all. Throughout the match I'd been struck by his introspection, how lonely he looked, precisely unlike the brash youth who'd swept so many before him five years ago. Careers don't always turn out like they should.

Still, Tipsarevic at 27 is proving it's never too late. He leaps five spots to No.12 in the world, supplanting Viktor Troicki as the No.2 Serbian. His aim for 2011 was a top 20 finish, an apparently ambitious goal for a late starter only now getting his act together. If it has turned out he aimed too low, we can hardly begrudge him some caution, and it hasn't mattered anyway. Like the title he now has but never cared about, it's all just gravy.

Hopes Uncarried

Two 500 events are underway in eastern Asia, in Tokyo and Beijing respectively. To order them thus is to rank them by draw quality, which is hard on Beijing, since it wasn't their idea for two-time defending champion and reigning Cincinnati finalist Novak Djokovic to pull out. It is interesting to note that the Chinese event is offering almost double the prize money of its Japanese equivalent, a gap of about a million dollars all up. Interest becomes fascination when we realise that notwithstanding its inflated prize pool, Beijing's biggest drawcard is Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, whilst Tokyo managed to procure the services of Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray. Word is that Nadal's appearance fee for Tokyo last year left little change from a million bucks, far

outstripping his winner's purse. Fascination thus begets cynicism, especially in light of Murray's recent complaints that mandatory events hurt his earning power, since the Masters don't pay players to turn up. Beijing gambled on Djokovic - the surest wager in tennis - and lost.

Anyway, on to the tennis, with no respect paid to round or locale. Andy Roddick is already homeward bound, pathetic when he needed to be bold against a rampant Kevin Anderson. Passive noodling worked back in Brisbane - I don't recall seeing them spar since - but Anderson has grown mightier since. Roddick's sour press conference has by now made the rounds. Depending on your prevailing sympathies towards the American No.2, you will view his retort - 'I think *you* should retire!' - as the greatest verbal riposte since Churchill, or as the latest boorish flare-up from an entitled brat. Or you may think it a storm in a tea set.

Grigor Dimitrov has once again displayed fabulous skill and flair in losing a close match to a top player. As he did at Wimbledon, he pushed Tsonga hard, but didn't win. It is unquestionable that his big breakthrough is merely a question of time. The question of how much time is harder to answer. It might well be a lot. Bernard Tomic is the aesthetic opposite to Dimitrov, although he more or less matches the Bulgarian for mercuriality, with his results oscillating wildly from week to week. Last week he lost badly to Flavio Cipolla, ranked 95. This week he's beaten Viktor Troicki, ranked 17, although Troicki won't be ranked that high for much longer. The Serbian reached the Tokyo semifinals last year, where he held match points against Nadal. Points will be shed.

Kei Nishikori carried the hopes of his nation into the first round against David Ferrer, but no further. Japan is, for the moment, a nation with hopes uncarried, and Project 45 remains tantalisingly unrealised. Janko Tipsarevic has followed up his maiden title with a first round exit the following week - to the fabulous Dimitry Tursonov - a pattern that seems common among first time titlists. Put that one down to, well, Tursonov winning more sets than him.

These Desultory Months

Tokyo, Quarterfinals

Murray d. Nalbandian, 6/4 7/5

Beijing, Quarterfinals

Berdych d. Verdasco, 6/1 6/0

Notwithstanding the annual ennui afflicting tennis after the US Open, last year's Fall Season was, by broad consensus, among the finest ever witnessed. (It is a measure of the cultural cringe pervading the Australian consciousness that I can so casually jot down the previous sentence, even as Spring rapidly uncoils here in Melbourne. Our Christmas may fall in mid-summer, but that doesn't disqualify it from all the northern hemisphere trimmings, up to and including fake snow and jolly medleys about reindeer.) For whatever reason, the final few months of every tennis season inspire only dull anxiety in the majority of commentators, which this year has been sharpened by the certainty that nothing could match 2010, let alone exceed it. It was shaping up to be a long few months. Following New York, Nadal, Djokovic and Federer were all pretty beaten up, and their absence or under-performance would deprive the Asian Swing of some essential cachet. We may talk all we want about the second tier seizing its opportunity, but the big guns put bums on seats, as they say. When your nation only sees one Tour stop per year, you'd probably rather the second tier made its name elsewhere.

All the same, initial results have been promising. Last week, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur arguably surpassed last year's events. This week Tokyo and Beijing certainly have. Punctuated by inexplicable blow-outs - Berdych d. Verdasco was *exemplary* - the tennis has been mostly first rate. Murray and Nadal remain on course for the Tokyo final, and Murray remains on course for the year-end No.3 ranking. The Scot saw off David Nalbandian in the quarterfinals, a match that many anticipated to be close, myself included. It wasn't especially close, in much the same way Nalbandian's matches against Federer at Wimbledon and Nadal at the US Open weren't. There is a psychology thesis waiting to be written on the perennial faith fans show in Nalbandian, even though it is now four years since he did anything truly outstanding. Nonetheless, everyone will talk up the Argentine's chances in the Davis

Cup final, since the fact that he has beaten Nadal before apparently trumps the fact that he hasn't beaten him recently, and that they will be playing on Spanish clay. Mark my words, the bandwagons will roll out like a Panzer division.

Meanwhile in Beijing, an initial haemorrhaging of seeds has ultimately done the tournament no harm. Tsonga and Berdych will presumably bludgeon each other to death in the first semifinal. Both are playing imposingly well, with the Czech dropping just three games in his last two matches. He dropped serve in the opening game against Verdasco, and set about proving this to be the least indicative start to a match in history, winning the next twelve. Unintentionally hilarious as ever, Verdasco had earlier remarked that "Last year I lost three first rounds during the Asian swing, but my form is [now] like it was in 2009". Cilic and Ljubicic will meet in the other semifinal, an all-Croatian affair, and a bit of an inter-generational showdown. It would be a nice event for Ljubicic to win, and on the apparently slicker Beijing surface, it is not beyond reason.

Man, Handled

Tokyo, Final

(2) Murray d. (1) Nadal, 3/6 6/2 6/0

The question of why a non-British person might support Andy Murray is a nice one, and when pressed most fans tend to give wildly varying, if not downright conflicting, reasons. Some point to his backhand, others to his sturdy, pale legs. Still others appreciate his calm and carefree demeanour. Whatever the reason, days like today offer something of a grand unified theory: when he plays like this, there is no one better. He dropped the opening set to Rafael Nadal, but then proceeded to eradicate the defending champion in a display so masterful that it must depressingly be termed Djokovic-like. He allowed Nadal just four points in the final set. If his play was nearly perfect, it was also perfectly judged, and the sumptuous verve with which he released torrents of winners will not only delight his fans, but will reinforce a dangerous precedent. There is a globally-cherished belief that Murray's best chance

at beating Nadal lies in remaining aggressive. Pundits implore him to do so endlessly. What they've forgotten to mention is that he should also do it well.

Broken-hearted, Murray remarked after the Wimbledon semifinal that he was now certain that whatever the question posed by Nadal, untrammelled aggression was not the answer. It was a clear admonishment to the tactless commentariat that advises Murray to press whenever possible. *See what happens?* his subtext ran. Leveller heads retorted that it wasn't enough simply to be ultra-aggressive. You still had to play well. They in turn pointed back to the Australian Open quarterfinal in 2010, when Murray pushed Nadal so hard that the Spaniard's knee exploded. Now they can point to the Tokyo final of 2011.

The issue, as I've remarked before, is that the moment Murray's aggression is trammelled, he grows pensive, passive and doubtful. From there, he finds it difficult to attack even when the opportunity arises, since he mostly lacks the transitional virtuosity of his immediate peers, even Djokovic. He usually comes out and either attacks or defends, but hardly ever both in the same point, and rarely in the same game. But then, every now and again, everything clicks into place, and suddenly his renowned court-sense is augmented by a deeper intuition. Like Djokovic, Nadal or Federer, he suddenly looks to be playing a purer sport, privy to hidden geometries, and fundamentally aware of every shot his opponent might possibly play. In the last set and a half today, Murray apparently had all the time in the world.

Whether this result will come to mean anything beyond itself remains an open question. After all, Tokyo is only a 500 event, if one of the better ones. If Murray follows up by defending his Shanghai Masters title, then his fans will be justified in their mounting excitement. Of course, justified or not, they are naturally excited already, and doubtless a mite frustrated that so rich a vein of form had to be struck in October, with no major championship until January. That is another thing they usually mention - how infuriatingly endearing it is, the way their hero seems always to peak at all the wrong moments. Some others mention family, which was brought to fore soon afterwards when he combined with his brother to win the doubles title.

As for Nadal, he made all the right noises in his speech afterwards, but you'd have to imagine this one hurt. He has now lost seven finals this year, and until now he could

console himself that the other losses had all been to Djokovic, which may not have alleviated their rawness, but at least offered him a way of cordoning off the pain. But even Djokovic hadn't fed him a bagel. It also keeps alive his astonishing record of having never defended a hardcourt title.

Wildcards No More

Shanghai Masters, Second Round

(10) Roddick d. Dimitrov, 7/6 7/5

Tomic d. (5) Fish, 4/6 6/1 6/4

Nishikori d. Haase, 0/6 7/5 7/6

The talk, as the Shanghai Masters commenced, was of how so anaemic a main draw might nonetheless provide nourishment for the rest of the field. Without Djokovic, Federer, Soderling or del Potro tending the kitchen, there are plenty of morsels upon which a hungry young player might snack. The food metaphor is close to collapse, so I'll just come out and say that for those remaining in contention for the Tour Finals, there remains a great deal to play for. And for everyone else, there's always plenty to play for, although this is especially true of the youngsters just making their way on to the regular tour. So far the results have been mixed (like a *salad*).

Sadly, far from drawing nourishment, Grigor Dimitrov has again made a meal of things. The exceedingly long, and mostly inexorable decline of Andy Roddick has brought him to the point at which he seems eminently beatable even when faced with a dewy-eyed youngster on the make. Many are fond of declaring that Dimitrov's big break is surely just around the corner - they never specify which corner - but had he not lost today, I'm not certain whether beating Roddick would even qualify as such. There was a time when even if Roddick couldn't survive Federer or Nadal, he could at least match it with Djokovic or Murray. It wasn't that long ago, but it isn't coming back.

The young Bulgarian is a tremendously exciting player to watch, and I suspect aficionados of stylish tennis are desperate for his breakthrough to come soon. But he

remains horrendously inconsistent, and his backhand wing is terribly fragile. Roddick directed everything there today, but I don't want to imply that he was thereby pressing Dimitrov's backhand. He was directing balls the way one might direct geriatrics on a senior's cruise. Roddick generates markedly less pace with two hands than the emaciated Dimitrov does with one, but he can get them in, which Dimitrov can't. It told a tale. Dimitrov belted some terrific winners, and made slightly more errors. Roddick steered clear of either (and steer really is the word). Dimitrov served for the second set, but was broken back and then fell away completely. I am left with the feeling that it was a performance in which Roddick will feel pride, subscribing to the erroneous idea that he was masterfully letting a flighty opponent beat himself, that a tactic of desperately getting one more ball back won him the day. It didn't.

The same might be said of Bernard Tomic, who followed up his accomplished win over Kevin Anderson yesterday by taking out Mardy Fish, which is hardly what Fish needs right now, with sultry London calling. Tomic, in that rich tradition of bizarre players, is a cruel prospect when you're having an off day, and Fish today proved that this remains true even for those near the top of the game. The 18 year old Australian was as composed as a veteran, and unflappable on both serve and return as the match wore down.

Kei Nishikori defeated Robin Haase in three strange sets, and has seen his ranking rise a provisional two places, although rankings are not official until the tournament concludes. On the face of it, this is not a big deal, until you realise that the ranking he has risen to is No.45, and that on Monday he will become the highest ranked Japanese male player of all time. Barring some unforeseen event, Monday will see the completion of Project 45.

The Spirit of Santoro

Shanghai Masters, Third Round

(15) Mayer d. (1) Nadal, 7/6 6/3

Ebden d. (8) Simon, 6/2 2/6 7/6

There is a great deal to be said for variety trumping power, for the idea that a multifarious approach to tennis might overcome a blunt determination to hit the ball very hard. Alas, there is less to be said in the current era, now that power and movement are nearly everything. Invariably what gets said emerges in a valedictory tone, a yearning for a bygone age, underscored by the plausible implication that such times will not return. After all, Federer's play can be tremendously varied, but we're deluding ourselves if we imagine he would possess 16 majors without his forehand, whose many variations are all on the theme of overwhelming pace. Variety will for now augment this, but no more. You get points for style, but the capacity consistently to move your opponent from the court bags silverware. By those lights, today's results in Shanghai harked back to a past era, a day of triumph for quick hands, net-rushing, oddball drop shots, hard work, and whatever it is that Andy Roddick does.

Florian Mayer saw off Rafael Nadal in two sets that were straighter than the scoreline suggests. One year ago Jurgen Melzer took three sets to achieve the same outcome - Nadal due home before the quarters - with a mighty performance that is still savoured among the Spaniard's detractors, and among Melzer's fans, which is almost certainly a smaller group. Today, Mayer's performance was comparable to the Austrian's only in the thoroughness with which the world No.2 was overwhelmed. Melzer's victory was a testament to the wisdom prevailing at the time, which was that hitting hard through Nadal's forehand wing would expose his questionable hardcourt-positioning. When power is all you have, such an approach is considered *tactical*. Lacking Melzer's penetration, Mayer's performance today owed everything to the strange feyness of his game. His winners find parts of the court you wouldn't think to cover. It helped that he served well, and faced no break points. It drove Nadal over the edge, and he was fittingly broken for a second time to see out the match.

Mayer's win was the biggest upset of the day, but it certainly wasn't the only one. Matthew Ebden's excellent run in Shanghai continues; he qualified, you'll recall. He has now claimed the scalp of Gilles Simon, who was seeded eighth here, and might be an outside chance to qualify for London if he stops losing for a moment. Ebden is like an Australian version of David Ferrer, although he isn't as quick, tenacious or swarthy. The Spanish version of David Ferrer saved match points in seeing off Juan Carlos Ferrero. Meanwhile Tomas Berdych, who was so imposing in winning Beijing last week, was swept summarily from the court by Feliciano Lopez, who served mightily, volleyed adroitly, and flaunted his bulging tanned thighs with practiced and casual expertise.

To cap it all, Bernard Tomic and Alexandr Dolgoplov – poster-children for strange and anachronistic play - did battle. Sadly, tennis this freaky was deemed too disturbing for public consumption, and they were shunted to a non-televised court. The only thing to emerge was the final score - 5/7 6/1 6/0 - suggesting that whatever bizarreness went on behind those closed doors, it was Santoro-class.

The Oft-Written Rule

Shanghai Masters, Final

(2) Murray d. (3) Ferrer 7/5 6/4

Andy Murray defeated David Ferrer in straight sets tonight, and thereby won the Shanghai Masters 1000 for the second year running. It is the Scot's eighth Masters title, which is presumably the most anyone has ever won without also winning a major. Eight puts him one clear of Michael Chang (apparently), and equal with Thomas Muster (again, apparently). This was pointed out by Jason Goodall after the match concluded, and I haven't checked whether it is correct. I do know, without checking, that both Chang and Muster have one Slam each (both at Roland Garros), and that this is one more than Murray has. I know this because everyone does, even those with the happy fortune not to be British. For those few who don't know, Robbie Koenig helpfully prodded the discussion that way immediately, wondering for only the 200th time why Murray cannot reproduce his Masters prowess in the Slams. He is 8-1 in Masters finals, and 0-3 in major finals. This is not news. Meanwhile, over at

Tennis.com they are running this urgent poll: "Does Andy Murray's play in Asia change your opinion of him as a Grand Slam title threat?" I only mention all of this since there is (apparently) a kind of rule that one has to. I could say it is an unwritten rule, but unwritten is the last thing it is.

The Shanghai title completes a clean sweep of the Asian Swing for Murray, which is unprecedented in men's tennis, and only diminished slightly when we remember that the Swing only lasts for three weeks, and that it has existed in its current format for only a few years. It also means that he has defended a hardcourt title every year since 2007, when he won San Jose for the second time. Granted, this is an obscure statistic, but it's impressive nonetheless, and enhanced when we recall that Nadal has never defended a hardcourt title at all. Say what you like about surface homogenisation, but the court still matters.

Tokyo remains the standout, most notably for the comprehensive drubbing of Rafael Nadal in the final, and the only slightly less complete mauling of Ferrer a round earlier. Indeed, the contrast between today's victory and last week's against Ferrer is revealing. Murray clearly needs a rest. Tonight the going was tight until 5/5 in the first, with Murray scolding his box after every other point, when Ferrer succinctly demonstrated with flawless economy why he has yet to claim a Masters title. From 30-0 up, and having played a scorching point to get there, he produced three perfectly incongruous backhand errors, topped by a double fault. The end was still some way off, but it had suddenly lurched into view. Murray, grateful, was too shocked even to abuse his guests, at least momentarily. Indeed, the Spaniard's backhand wing was little short of a liability tonight, which must have dismayed him greatly, since he is generally technically impregnable, with a great set of wheels. That said, Murray clearly knew something coming into the match, and he pressed and kneaded the backhand mercilessly. Errors duly leaked out. Breaks were briefly traded in the second, but the result looked quite foregone by this time, which is presumably what Murray was roaring at his box whenever Ferrer almost won a point.

Murray will now move to No.3 in the rankings, replacing Federer. It will very likely stay that way until the end of the year.

Awkward commentary moment of the week arrived courtesy of Robbie Koenig, happily reunited with Jason Goodall. Apropos of an over-anxious let machine, Goodall remarked that, "It can be recalibrated. It does get a little sensitive."

To which Koenig, forgetting that it is 2011, replied, "It'd be nice to make that sort of adjustment on my wife sometimes."

A lead balloon has to be particularly weighty for Goodall to neither assist nor impede its progress, but he was wise in letting that one plummet of its own accord.

The European Indoors (October – November)

He Just Can't Win

Stockholm, First Round

Nalbandian d. Malisse, 4/6 7/6 7/6

Nine years ago David Nalbandian and Xavier Malisse met in the semifinal of what is widely considered to be the dreariest Wimbledon in living memory, a judgement derived in large part from the fact that they both featured in the final four. (The other part of the reason is that the tournament was little short of a gimme for Lleyton Hewitt, which should never be said of any major.)

Naturally, our regard for Wimbledon 2002 would have seen a sharp revision upwards had either of those players gone on to forge stellar careers. The prevailing memory of drudging inevitability and pedestrian upsets would have been softened had it somehow portended mastery to come. It didn't, of course, though to say so is to subscribe to the popular view of Nalbandian as a feckless wastrel. I have always found this view a little pernicious, since compared to most, he has achieved a lot, and would certainly have achieved more had he chosen his era more carefully. The fact that he can beat everyone occasionally does not mean he can beat anyone at will, and if his legendary 2007 indoor season enhanced his legend, it probably harmed his reputation in the long run. As for Malisse, he really is a feckless wastrel, and would be in any era. He is something like what Nalbandian would have been if the latter really had won nothing, if the Argentine's essential streakiness had been condensed still further, such that his best tennis lasted not weeks, but hours.

Sadly, minutes was about the extent of it tonight in Stockholm. Neither player played well at the same time, and neither sustained their form for long. Malisse played better at the start, but Nalbandian was superior at the very end, which is when it matters. Tennis matches are often decided by whoever wins the final point. It's a funny sport that way. Despite all of that, it was a tremendously absorbing contest, although it is misleading to say you just never knew what was coming next. When Malisse moved ahead in the second set tiebreak, you just knew he was going to blow it. The same went for Nalbandian when he served for the match in the third. He

also saved a couple of match points, most excitingly of all, but also most revealingly. Both men were striking the ball well by this moment, although it was Nalbandian who retained a clear head - his genius has always been for thoughtful point construction - while Malisse grew aimlessly careful, suddenly going against type. It cost the Belgian the match . . . perhaps. Usually he is more reckless, through being more frustrated, and the result is much the same. Sometimes, you just can't win.

Lurid in the Twilight

Stockholm, Second Round

Not all tournaments are created equal, even those luridly lit and putatively interchangeable events lurking in the twilight in the season, with their boastful courts and eyesore silverware. To those who cannot be bothered to watch them all - an exclusive category featuring nearly everyone on Earth - they probably all do seem alike, with little to differentiate Stockholm from Vienna, or Moscow from St Petersburg. It certainly feels like there are plenty of them, although a quick headcount reveals only six spread over a three week lead up to their apotheosis in the Paris Indoors. Of the six, only Basel is a big deal, although this elevated status will not outlive Federer's retirement. Meanwhile, this week we have the richly-traditioned Stockholm - where grown men do battle in a blue gymnasium for a retro doomsday device - and Moscow, always a popular destination in October, whose trophy is unremarkable but for a pewter booster-rocket assembly on the bottom.

Of course, watching tournaments is the best way to tell them apart, and having watched the early rounds of Stockholm I can say that it's been very good. This mostly reflects the quality of the draw, which I would contend is stronger than Moscow's, stylistically diverse and cosmopolitan where Moscow's is largely made up of baselining Slavs. There have been a few close matches, and the blowouts have been thrilling in their own way, for the way they have showcased perennial favourites doing what they once did best, and the best of the youngsters doing what they should do more.

Nalbandian d. (7) Dodig, 6/1 6/1

Blake d. (2) Del Potro, 6/4 6/4

I covered Nalbandian's first round a few days ago - a taut, low-grade skirmish with Xavier Malisse - and it was nice to see a dramatic improvement in his play today. He demolished Ivan Dodig, which is by no means easy to do, in a display of flawless hardcourt tennis, taking the ball early, volleying with authority - I love the way he ghosts to the net - and committing almost no errors. Last night James Blake blasted Juan Martin del Potro from the court. Blake is one of the few players who can out-muscle the Argentine's renowned forehand, at least on those precious occasions he doesn't spray it everywhere. Del Potro was curiously restrained.

Dimitrov d. (4) Chela, 6/2 5/7 6/1

(6) Raonic d. Petzschner, 6/3 6/3

(1) Monfils d. Tomic, 6/4 6/7 6/4

Grigor Dimitrov, the most lauded of the new generation, although as yet the least accomplished, somehow dropped the second set to Juan Ignacio Chela, but otherwise performed with consummate all-court virtuosity, easily the finest match I have seen from the Bulgarian since his arrival on the main tour. The slick Stockholm surface is particularly well-suited to Milos Raonic's power game, and after surviving a tough but tedious first round against Marcos Baghdatis, he saw off Philip Petzschner pretty easily, for all that the surface favours the German's game, too. Dimitrov and Raonic will meet in the quarterfinals, and either will make a worthy semifinalist. On this surface, and given the relative weakness of Dimitrov's returns, I would favour Raonic. Meanwhile, Bernard Tomic contrived to fade sharply against Gael Monfils, despite leading 4/2 with a point for a double break in the third. Suffice it to say, he didn't take the break point, and thereafter experience won out, which is a statement I never thought would apply to Monfils.

The Reverse Is Also True

Stockholm, Semifinals

Nieminen d. Blake, 7/6 5/7 6/2

(1) Monfils d. (6) Raonic, 6/7 6/4 6/3

One year ago in Stockholm, in the wake of a 6/0 6/2 drubbing at the hands of Jarkko Nieminen, it seemed clear that James Blake's tennis career had entered that uneasy stage in which retirement is only a short press conference away. Far from drying up, the baffling losses to journeymen and one-time whipping boys had now joined up to become a thriving and self-sustaining wetland. While the similarly Lear-esque Hewitt continued to be thwarted by tough draws, Blake had devolved to the point where no draw could be anything but. No match was a gimme. Given that the end was merely a formality, his insistence that he still had good tennis left in him seemed equal parts deluded and perverse. And yet, perhaps he was correct. One year later, he has again lost to Jarkko Nieminen, but by the respectable scoreline of 7/6 5/7 6/2. The match was much closer, and it was a semifinal. I suppose that's progress.

Nieminen will play Gael Monfils in the final, although he wasn't too far from playing Milos Raonic, instead. The Canadian led by a set and a break, which on this surface and wielding his serve is usually the better part of victory. Tonight, once he had unaccountably faltered, it was the worst part of disappointment. From 4/2 in the second he won only a few more games, which would have been fine had he won them immediately, and consecutively. We can chalk this one up to inexperience, I suppose, or weariness, since indoor tennis is just so exhausting.

If I was to be fair, I might also chalk it up to Monfils, who generally ventures from his shell at this time of year. Less obsessed with being 'entertaining', he plays with more adventure and authority, and is consequently far more entertaining. It is almost as though he is usually concerned that the fans in the bleachers are bored by watching tennis played well, and have for some reason come to a pro-tennis match hoping to see something else, which is only true in America. Really, tennis crowds are generally pretty thrilled by good tennis (valuing it almost half as much as seeing their random compatriots win, which is sadly true everywhere).

Moscow, Semifinals

(1) Tipsarevic d. (4) Davydenko, 6/2 7/5

Meanwhile in Moscow, Janko Tipsarevic has progressed to his fourth ATP final of the season, overcoming Nikolay Davydenko. Davydenko held a bunch of set points in the second set, but he can no longer close these things out. It wasn't so long ago that the Russian was the tour's form player, defeating Federer and Nadal in the same event twice in succession. He is now part of a long tradition in tennis of the career segmented by a grievous injury, and by no means the latest or the saddest. He struck the ball beautifully at times in the second set tonight, but he used to do that all time. No one knows why he cannot do it all the time now, except that it has something to do with confidence, a lazily capacious excuse that reveals less than it obscures. It certainly doesn't tell us whether we will see Davydenko around next year.

Tipsarevic will meet defending champion Viktor Troicki in the final, guaranteeing that no matter how hard the Serb tries not to win, the guy up the other end will be trying even harder. The reverse is also true.

Fighting the Tide

Moscow, Final

(1) Tipsarevic d. (2) Troicki, 6/4 6/2

Stockholm, Final

(1) Monfils d. Nieminen, 7/5 3/6 6/2

Janko Tipsarevic's first title on the ATP Tour was a long while coming, and for a time his quest for silverware figured among the more diverting side-narratives that liberally pepper the sport. It is worth remembering this, for upon claiming his maiden title in Kuala Lumpur last month there was every chance it will be forgotten, as so much is forgotten. Now that he has augmented that trophy with a second, in Moscow, that chance has become a certainty. The by-line that Tipsarevic was the highest profile player never to win a title was at the top of every commentator's crib

sheet, along with whatever book he is reading at the moment, but next year it won't be. The urge to preserve ephemera is of course quixotic, a commitment to fight the tide. But when the tide is one of forgetting, the fight is worth having. We save what we can.

Anyway, claiming his second title appeared no harder than claiming his first (and for that matter no harder than claiming Eastbourne in June, or Rosmalen last year, which he nonetheless failed to do). In the semifinal he defeated Nikolay Davydenko and in the final Viktor Troicki, with the former presenting a sterner challenge than the latter, as one might expect. Even now, I cannot come at the idea that Davydenko in Moscow is not better than Troicki. In any case, there is always a pecking order among players from the same company, even amongst a group knit as closely as the Serbs. It often bears only a tangential relationship to the respective rankings. Lleyton Hewitt, for example, retains seniority amongst the Australian player group, and his compatriots will mostly defer to him. Tipsarevic already outranked Troicki, which technically made him the second-ranked Serb. Today's uncomplicated victory has assured us the abstraction of the numbers is now matched by the reality. You may recall that Troicki replaced Tipsarevic in the deciding rubber of last year's Davis Cup final. There is no chance of that happening now, especially given the fresh trend is for Djokovic to sub himself in, even while injured.

Tipsarevic moves to a slightly more respectable 2-4 in career finals, Troicki: 1-4. It could be worse. It could be 1-10, which is now Jarkko Nieminen's record after losing to Gael Monfils in the final of Stockholm. Mind you, Monfils can hardly gloat - he has improved to 4-11. That's a combined 8-29. Really, they were all lucky to be playing each other this weekend.

Energy to Burn

In the end, St Petersburg and Vienna turned out better than they might have, testament to the extent to which the final match's quality determines our appraisal of an entire event. A dud decider can negate an entire week of solid play, while drama at the death might inspire us to re-assess the tedium the preceded it, generously to

relabel it 'build-up'. I've been sick enough to distend time itself, but even so it felt as though both tournaments this week had a lot of build-up.

St Petersburg, Final

(4) Cilic d. (2) Tipsarevic, 6/3 3/6 6/2

St Petersburg witnessed a resumption of normal service, insofar as Janko Tipsarevic was back to his most characteristic, following a brief few weeks in which he was uncharacteristically at his best. Here he was losing a final to someone ranked lower than him, a habit he had made his own before the title-spree of recent weeks. He was unusually unadventurous, particularly in the sets he lost. Winning begets confidence in some, but perhaps Tipsarevic isn't that way disposed. For others, favouritism can become paralysing.

Any hope that the second seed would be able to feed off the crowd's energy was doomed to disappointment. The energetic parts of the crowd didn't show up, and occasional shots of the sparse attendees showed they were not alone. The hall, at best, was half-full. There was also no commentary, further deflating the vibe for those who had stayed home. What those who didn't watch missed was a fairly engaging tennis match, although it was the ostensibly less-fancied Marin Cilic forcing the play, prising open the court. He and his player's box harnessed whatever energy remained in the stadium, and he rode it to his first title in about 20 months, and a return to the top 20.

Vienna, Final

(1) Tsonga d. (2) del Potro, 6/7 6/3 6/4

There was energy to burn at the Wiener Stadthalle - which frankly is not best practice from an environmental perspective - and lots more people watching, and commentary: all the trimmings. Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Juan Martin del Potro artfully dodged these pockets of combusting energy, and otherwise produced some energetic indoor tennis. Tsonga is naturally more suited to this surface than del Potro, but being French he is also more prone to doing dumb crap for no reason. Both were monsterring forehands and serves, as you would expect, and it was the Argentinean who grabbed the initial lead, although he was never the same after he

broke in the second set. From his subsequent play, it appeared as though going up a set and a break put del Potro right where Tsonga wanted him. From there it was just a matter of the Frenchman finishing him off. It more or less did pan out that way, lending the last hour or so a quality of an extended denouement. Tsonga's win bolsters his chance of qualifying for the World Tour Finals. I hope he makes it.

Basel Blues

Basel, Second Round

(3) Federer d. Nieminen, 6/1 4/6 6/3

Mayer d. (6) Tipsarevic, 5/1 ret.

The word is that Basel is playing fast, as it should, although the vision is that it is playing blue, which is a shame. Gone is that uniquely dusted pink and confectionery lilac surface, upon which Roger Federer - last year a lissom vision in lavender - gambolled to a fourth title. He's now clad in blue, the court is blue, and it's all a bit of a downer.

Something new: Federer has by now progressed through to the quarterfinals, and beneath the blue shell the real colour has been rust. Last night, something happened that has never happened before. For the first time in twelve career meetings, Federer dropped a set to Jarkko Nieminen. He still won, and the third set wasn't especially close, but so ineluctable has the discourse of his decline become that even this will be read in that drearily fading light. To do so we must momentarily forget that Federer has barely played in a month, and that Nieminen has played a lot, but history glosses such details anyway.

Federer will next face the winner of Andy Roddick and Radek Stepanek. Roddick surely dreams of a head-to-head as healthy as 0-12. The American is 2-20 against Federer. Indeed, the entire quarter seems populated exclusively by Federer's hapless whipping boys from better part of last decade. Now that Andy Murray's on-again-off-again appearance is off-again - a tweaked back, apparently - the defending champion will surely fancy his chances to make the final. Actually, that last sentence

is patently ludicrous, since the art of being Roger Federer lies in always fancying his chances, rust or not, blue or otherwise.

Something old: Janko Tipsarevic has again retired from a tennis match, the third time he has succumbed this year. Justly or not, it has kind of becoming his thing, and part of the larger narrative whereby 2011 becomes the year in which precautionary retirements become sadly *de rigueur*. In any case, his latest withdrawal has prompted someone over at menstennisforums to a little archaeological work, and they've unearthed figures to reinforce the sense that Tipsarevic retires a lot. I suppose we knew it anyway, but it's always useful to have a number placed alongside these things. The number in this case is 13.5%, and it confirms that more than one in every eight of Tipsarevic losses comes before the match's natural conclusion. We can place this alongside his career retirement Golden Grand Slam, an accolade that has thus far eluded even Djokovic.

I imagine there are players with worse records than Tipsarevic in this respect (even ignoring Djokovic's skewed 2011 stats, in which 66.6% of his losses have been retirements). But there is a reason we don't hear much about any other's achievements in this field - and some are *prolific* - and yet are reminded constantly about an infamous few. It has everything to do with reputation. In Tipsarevic's case, his notorious showing in the Eastbourne final has guaranteed that whenever he withdraws the reaction even from sympathetic fans is no longer one of surprise. The cynics, of course, have a field day. I am personally quite partial to the guy, and find his game attractive, but I feel my cynicism growing.

Nothing borrowed.

Burly Men Draped In Bedding

Valencia, Second Round

Querrey d. (2) Tsonga, 7/6 6/2

With five of the eight London spots already claimed, the race for the remaining three is tight, which under ideal circumstances would mean that the contenders are giving their all, especially with only two weeks of the regular season remaining. The front-runners are Tomas Berdych, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Mardy Fish, and you could throw a blanket over them, presuming that burly men draped in bedding is your thing.

If tennis is a momentum sport - and it is - then it is worth pointing out that none of these burly men have progressed beyond the second round this week in Valencia or Basel, posting losses to Nishikori, Blake and Querrey respectively. I could say that they're saving themselves for a final push at the Paris Indoors next week, but that would be generous, and is probably only likely for Tsonga, who like all Frenchmen generally excels at the Palais Omnisports de Paris-Bercy. He won the title in 2008. Meanwhile, 2010 surely taught Berdych - or the maintenance crew that keeps him operational - that scraping in to the Tour Finals on a losing streak is a recipe for failure. He was impressive in Beijing, but hasn't been since. Meanwhile, Fish has never performed well in this part of the season, despite conditions apparently tailored for his game. To be fair, he was compelled to withdraw from Basel after nearly hurting his knee.

Last year the final few qualifiers all gained their berth on days they posted losses. Naturally, qualification for London reflects a season's worth of achievements, but it still felt appropriate (although Soderling claimed Bercy after that). Subsequently, none of them impressed at the O2, and although it was hard to blame them for not making it out of the round robin stage - the Big Four were untouchable - they could surely have acquitted themselves better. Glandular fever has wrecked Soderling's 2011, and he won't be in London this time. Andy Roddick is the other man missing, for the first time in years, and I doubt he'll ever be back. If we are not to see a repeat of last year, in which Nos.5-8 were merely fodder for the insatiable elite above them, the remaining contenders had better find some form. They can't all win Paris, but

they can do well, and ensure that the round robin stage in London is more than a tune-up for the big boys.

Of Floodgates

Basel, Semifinals

Nishikori d. (1) Djokovic, 2/6 7/6 6/0

(3) Federer d. Wawrinka, 7/6 6/2

Kei Nishikori has, in his quiet and enthusiastic way, figured among the brighter stories of the so-called Fall season, his achievements outshone only by those of Andy Murray, blindingly good in Asia, and Janko Tipsarevic. As with the latter's unrelenting failure to claim a maiden title, Nishikori's fabled pursuit of Project 45 - whereby he would become the highest ranked male Japanese player of all time - had developed into one of the most intriguing of the Tour's innumerable side-narratives.

Nishikori broke into the top 50 for the first time in April of this year, and appeared to be rising fast. However, in the long months since, he twice rose agonisingly to No.46, before subsiding fitfully. Doubts found expression, and much like Tipsarevic's pursuit of silverware, the inevitability of the accomplishment began to look questionable. Then, three weeks ago, he reached the semifinals of the Shanghai Masters, and overshot his ambition by some margin, climbing to No.30. Again like Tipsarevic - who eventually claimed his first title in Kuala Lumpur some weeks prior and then almost immediately claimed his second in Moscow (and nearly had a third in St Petersburg) - the realisation of Project 45 has opened something of a floodgate. Today he became the first Japanese man to defeat a reigning world No.1. By beating Novak Djokovic, soundly, he has guaranteed a ranking of at least No.25 next week. If he somehow defeats the greatest player of them all in the final, he will climb to around No.21. Win or lose, I suspect he will be recalibrating his expectations for 2012.

Coming in to today's semifinal, the prevailing odds were not kind to Nishikori's chances, and they saw little revision as the top seed tore through the opening set in fine fashion. Much will naturally be made of Djokovic's shoulder, which received

constant treatment and will probably see him withdraw from the Paris Indoors next week, but it hung together well enough for the Serb to come within two points of the match, with Nishikori serving at 4/5 in the second. There is such a thing a close bagel, with all of the games going to deuce, but today's third set was not an example of this. Djokovic won about a dozen points. Nishikori was fearless, but then he usually is, and executed perfectly, which is an exciting new development. The dexterous net exchanges were superb.

In the final he will play Roger Federer, who didn't have too much trouble seeing off Stanislas Wawrinka in straight sets, bringing their head-to-head to 10-1. It will be Federer's sixth consecutive Basel final (eighth overall), and, should he win, his fifth title. Figuratively, we might say that he owns this event.

Valencia, Semifinals

Monaco d. (1) Ferrer, 7/5 1/6 6/3

We can literally say that David Ferrer owns Valencia, which means we can assume the event will have Hawkeye next year. It is only one of two 500 level tournaments that lack the technology, which some have called an 'oversight', as though it was on that portion of the To-Do list obscured by a coffee cup. In any case, for Ferrer, the lack of Hawkeye has led to the worst kind of injustice imaginable: the kind that affects him. He thought he had saved a breakpoint with an ace, but it was called out. The dummy was spat, the overrule was not forthcoming, and the impossibility of recourse to Hawkeye was duly noted. Schadenfreude was doled out. Ferrer lost to Juan Monaco, who will face Marcel Granollers in the final, an incongruous line-up for an indoors hardcourt event, although it *is* the slowest hardcourt on the tour. According to Tsonga, the balls are flat, too.

A Quaver in His Voice

Basel, Final

(3) Federer d. Nishikori, 6/1 6/3

Roger Federer has won his second title of 2011, his fifth career Basel title, and 68th overall. In the scheme of things, you would imagine that this one has little to recommend it beyond being by far the most recent, but Federer's tears afterwards demonstrated otherwise. It's been that kind of year. He didn't blubber - that he reserves for Rod Laver Arena or Rod Laver's shoulder - but when it came time for him and Kei Nishikori to dispense medals to the ball-kid honour-guard, he was audibly choked. It isn't so long since he stood among them. Afterwards, as per the tradition, he scoffed pizza among them. Winning Basel has clearly come to mean more to Federer as the seasons roll by, a quality it probably only shares with Wimbledon. The latter is hallowed, and the former is home. Now that he has cleared 30, those tears were as valedictory as the quaver in his voice when he promised to return next year.

There was a tiny moment in last year's final when, desperate to break Novak Djokovic in the deciding set, Federer muttered something idly to an attendant ball-kid, only to reduce the lad to nodding worship. Today he needed no such help, since his mere presence had apparently done the same to Nishikori. Nishikori had been frank in assessing yesterday's win over Djokovic, confessing that he'd like to do it again when the world No.1 was fully fit. Nevertheless, the young Japanese had displayed little mercy in crushing his overwhelmingly more experienced opponent, the way so many others don't when presented with the same opportunity. Most players' initial response to receiving a gift-horse is to conduct a thorough dental examination, and then shrug disconsolately as the horse is led away. And it's not as though Djokovic was rendered immobile, like Fabio Fognini at Roland Garros. Nishikori was just fearless.

Today's final told a different tale. Nishikori had also mentioned how thrilled he was to be playing Federer. He probably hoped that the thrill would pass quickly, however, so that he could get down to playing tennis. I would lying if I said he never really got over it, since he looked to be hitting his straps when Federer stepped up to serve at

5/3 in the second set. Nishikori even gained his first break point. He didn't win it, of course, and on its own it is hardly a missed chance worth ruing. His run had conceivably come too late. Afterwards he just looked pleased to be there.

He had, after all, been given the best seat in the house while Federer delivered one of his renowned beat-downs, and I sometimes suspect that this is what young players secretly hope will happen when they finally get a shot at their erstwhile idol. They want to know just how it feels to be utterly manhandled by the greatest player ever, how that forehand actually feels when he's nailing it. In order for Nishikori - substitute Tomic or Harrison or whoever - to beat Federer, he would honestly have to perform well below his best. For their first encounter with him wouldn't they prefer him at his best? Isn't that part of why they're so thrilled even before the first ball is struck? It was a measure of Jonas Bjorkman's eternal boyishness that he felt the same even as a 34 year old, in a Wimbledon semifinal.

I don't know how it felt, but Federer's forehand looked again like the most ferocious shot in the sport, and his backhand wasn't far shy of that. He moved well, and the serve remains as incisive as ever. He will move on to the Paris Indoors presumably invigorated, and with his house in order, to begin yet another assault on the Masters event that remains a strange gap in this resume. With Nadal and Soderling convalescing elsewhere, and Djokovic and Murray doubtful starters, he is once more the man to beat.

Andante

Paris Masters 1000, Second Round

Precisely 52 weeks ago, the tone among spectators and players at the Paris Indoors was playful –*alla scherzando* - and the pulse of the tennis was a crisp *vivace*. The final Masters event of the year had laid down one of its fastest courts in years, and the indoor specialists were revelling in it. Confounding the fears of the mordant few, the slick surface had not produced a catastrophic return to the serve-centric yawn-fests of the 90s. The tennis was 'all-court', which is more of the court than sees use for the bulk of the year: Robin Soderling's aptitude for serve-volleying is

commensurate with his capacity for light-hearted banter, and he still won the whole thing. Afterwards, Bercy 2010 was widely paraded as a rousing triumph - the semifinals were outstanding - and happy proof that fast indoor tennis can be something to savour, even in an era when almost no one can volley.

A year on, and the tone in Paris has soured, which would have been fine if the talk was empty, and if tone was all there was. Sadly, there's been tennis, too, and it has mostly borne out the chatter. The new court is slow - although perhaps less glacial as has been stridently declared - and the balls are slower still, which has allowed Jo-Wilfried Tsonga to pick up his ranting where he left off in Valencia. (His inability to pass Sam Querrey was held up as a clear reflection of the conditions, and not as a reflection of his passing shots.)

The slowness of the Paris court doubtless accounts for the trouble Mardy Fish had in seeing off Florian Mayer. Fish ranks among the more attacking players on the tour, primarily since he cannot keep the ball in play for very long. A treacly surface is consequently the last thing he needs, especially with a Tour Finals berth at stake. Thus disadvantaged, he dropped three whole games, and Mayer has been in rare form of late. Fish's London spot is now a single win away.

The thing is, even allowing for the court's reduced speed, and for the tendency of the balls to fluff up quickly, it has made little tangible difference to the results. The upsets you might have expected on a fast court - Lopez defeating Monfils - have still happened. Players like Fish and Isner are looking strong. Federer looked lethal, while Murray and Djokovic are spry enough to cover any surface slower than oiled glass. As I write, Roddick has just self-destructed, demolished a racquet, and then abused Mohamed Lahyani for not issuing the code-violation fast enough. That has nothing to do with the surface, since unlike most players, whose tantrums require a reason, Roddick's just need a place. More interestingly, not a single match in the second round went to a deciding set - is this some kind of record? - although I'm not convinced this says anything useful about the conditions, so much as the late-season form of some players. In any case, constant babble about the court speed is mostly a distraction, a specific extrusion of the sport's essential echolalia; background noise swelling into the aural foreground, but never quite into music. The tennis goes on anyway.

The End Is Nigh

Paris Masters 1000, Third Round

(5) Berdych d. (11) Tipsarevic, 7/5 6/4

Monaco d. (7) Fish, 1/6 7/6 1/2 ret.

(1) Djokovic d. (15) Troicki, 4/6 6/3 6/1

The consequences of Tomas Berdych's perpetually evolving victory over Janko Tipsarevic in Paris today will resonate both in the short term and the long. Most immediately, it means that the final line up for the World Tour Finals has been decided (perhaps), meaning the ATP website will have to find something else to go on about for the time being. This outcome is being widely reported, as expected.⁷

Less discussed, but unarguably more profound, has been the ineradicable demonstration that robotics has progressed to the point whereby even a merely steady AI will overcome a fallible human. The ending has begun. It may seem a large jump from Berdych to Skynet, but tyranny never begins all at once. Later generations, huddled starving in their bunkers, will view Berdych's first win over Tipsarevic in five meetings as a tipping point, the point when the machines gained something like sentience, and watched on in wonder as the humans discarded theirs. Twice.

Tipsarevic blew leads in both sets, and both times the collapse was total. It is one thing to be broken back while serving for a set, even indoors, but it quite another to be broken again and again. Berdych can admittedly be a terrifying prospect when he is imposing his game, with 'game' in this sense meaning hitting the ball very hard from the baseline. Beijing was a good example. Today was nothing like that. He was merely steady, having realised - *sentience!* - that even at 1/5 down, nothing more was required. Tipsarevic makes serving for a set look like the most precarious position imaginable. Perhaps I am being harsh, but the Serb will finish 2011 in the top ten, and this will be his final match of his break-out season (perhaps).

⁷The final three qualifiers are Berdych, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Mardy Fish.

The reason I qualify the point is that Tipsarevic has narrowly missed out on a Tour Finals berth, but will go in as first alternate should one of the qualifiers withdraw for any reason. As it happens, Mardy Fish managed to injure himself whilst seeing off Juan Monaco, and was compelled to retire. As a rule, I have little patience for precautionary retirements, but clearly the decision not to proceed was justified. This will be his first appearance at the Tour Finals, and even those who qualify every year regard it as an honour. He was clearly injured, and sacrificing his spot merely to grind out a painful win in Bercy - and then face Federer - understandably held little allure.

Novak Djokovic doubtless enjoyed a broadly similar apathy coming into his match against Viktor Troicki. He certainly looked disinclined to win, and sprayed several hundred errors in dropping the first set. There was more of the same to begin the second, except that Troicki reverted to type, and could not gain the decisive break no matter how many times Djokovic double faulted. The world No.1 somehow held at 2/2, and then realised that even down a set it would be quicker and easier just to win the thing and get off court. He allowed Troicki just two more games, which is two more than he deserved.

Finally, In Paris, Indoors

Paris Masters 1000, Semifinals

(3) Federer d. (5) Berdych, 6/4 6/3

(6) Tsonga d. Isner, 3/6 7/6 7/6

The question inevitably comes up at this point in the season as to why the Paris Indoors remains such a strange blot on Roger Federer's unmatched record. Unlike, say, Sampras at Roland Garros, Federer is an outstanding indoor player, and he generally performs well in France, where he is as perennially popular as everywhere else. And yet until last year, he had never even passed the quarterfinals. Until today he had never progressed to the final. The complicated and highly technical answer is that it is just one of those things: *so it goes*. As tempting as a structural assessment is - *what is the real issue here?* - there is really little point, as antithetical as that is to

the narrativising conceit of sports commentary. Occasionally he played badly, or David Nalbandian played beautifully. Early on, he rarely played at all, which really blew out the odds on him winning. In 2008 he withdrew from his quarterfinal with James Blake, which remains the only time he has ever withdrawn before a match (he has never retired during one). None of these reasons have much in common, barring the fact that they occurred late in the season, in Paris, indoors. Now, late in the sport's most decorated career, he has a tremendous shot at it.

But why now? Some may point at Murray's loss, Djokovic's withdrawal and Nadal's absence. But this trio had no hand in Federer's previous failures at this venue. Others might say that nearing the end of a relatively dismal season, he was due for a big result. It's a neat idea, but 'due' is the clue that it's a dud. No one is due anything in tennis, especially those who've won nearly everything. What Federer has achieved, he has earned, and he earned his spot in the Bercy final with a coruscating display of honed ball striking over a helpless Tomas Berdych. He closed the match by breaking to love. Perfect moments, so they say, have a clean design.

Federer will play Tsonga in the final, and his favouritism is overwhelming. True, having spent much of the week griping about the speed of the court and fluffiness of the balls, Tsonga scraped through his semifinal in coarse style, fending off three match points against that renowned slow court specialist John Isner. The Frenchman didn't play well, and now he's tired. Federer played well, and looks fresh. Of course, he was fresh at Wimbledon, and look how that turned out. The same went for Montreal. And Tsonga already owns a Paris Masters shield.

Last year, of course, Federer fell to Gael Monfils in three tight sets after holding five match points, the apotheosis of a habit he was rather taken with at the time. He has lately combined it with blowing a two set lead, a potent cocktail of heartbreak for his fans. The good news is that a two set lead will probably get it done tomorrow. It generally proves decisive in the best-of-three set format. The ATP markets the nine Masters 1000 events as the premiere tournaments on its calendar, and used to back that claim up with five set finals. Some of these finals proved to be classics, spectacles worthy of a major. We were approaching a point at which even the general public might start tuning in to watch. Think of Rome 2006, one of the matches of the decade. There was no telling where it would end up, except that it

ended up with Tommy Robredo winning Hamburg the following week. That outcome was summarily deemed too appalling to risk repeating, a crime against man and god, and so five set finals were no more. Christmas was also cancelled, I recall.

Regardless, the Masters 1000 events have mostly regained their cachet, and the fact that only top players win them suggests that the airy dream of their elevated status is justified by how they actually play out. Making attendance mandatory helps.

Federer has become the first man to reach the final at all of them. If he manages to win that final he will gain a lot of things, not least of which will be satisfaction at a masterful week, and valuable momentum as he begins his title defence in London. He will also guarantee that next year, for the first time in years, he won't have to endure the question of why he's never won Bercy. He once remarked that this was the best part of finally winning the French Open in 2009, the fact that he'd never have to be asked about it again.

Extending His Longevity

Paris Masters 1000, Final

(3) Federer d. (6) Tsonga, 6/1 7/6

Federer's eventual victory at the Paris Indoors was no more foregone than it was ordained, but as the first set unfolded today in the Palais Omnisports de Paris-Bercy, it might have seemed that way. After a decade of near misses, Federer was in the final, and on fire. Surely the moment was at hand. However, a sense of entitlement is a fraught thing for a fan to feel, and perilous for a player, although there was never any danger Federer would take Jo-Wilfried Tsonga lightly, given their recent history. That Wimbledon quarterfinal, in which Federer refunded a two set lead, surely remains jagged and open, and might always. Hubris is only attractive when punished, but who can begrudge hope?

Initial difficulties had not proved indicative. Obligated to fend off break points in the first game, Federer broke Tsonga in the second, and about 20 minutes later held the set. Tsonga was no doubt wearied from his toils astride Isner the day before, but to be

frank he didn't look too haggard. He just wasn't playing very well, his serve ill-directed, while Federer was dialled in from the get go.

Over the years, more has gone wrong for the Swiss at this tournament than at any other, and often it has gone wrong from a set up. Tsonga lifted, and the games grew tight. Hope wavered, faced with the prospect of another inspired opponent storming back. Federer fended off a break point in the seventh game, as did Tsonga in the eighth. Then it was the third seed's turn to lift. The Frenchman sputtered and lurched to the tiebreak, while Federer flowed, his liquid whip forehand snapping crisp winners through a pair of love holds. Momentum can shift in a tiebreak, or it can't. Today it didn't, and the assertiveness with which Tsonga had commenced the second set continued to drain away. The errors were soft and Federer's first serve grew scathing. A couple of match points arrived and dutifully departed - a deft drop shot and a crashing serve. Recall that Federer now requires a buffer of three in any big match. He served, they rallied, and a last Tsonga forehand sailed long. Federer pivoted to trace its arc, the last stroke of the regular 2011 season. As the ball found the court, he lifted his face to the crowd and his arms to the roof.

Afterward he seemed tangibly thrilled to heft the frozen liquorice trophy, its cluttered modernity - simultaneously echoing the inelegant wrought iron of the Paris Metro and the lethally tangled wreckage of the Somme, or something - wholly in keeping with the European indoor events, which are determined to outdo each other in this regard. He confessed in his modestly fluent French, translated with dogged approximation by Robbie Koenig, just how much this title meant to him, and for a wonder it sounded heartfelt. He added that his sick daughter had crawled into bed at 4am that morning, and that this had not been the ideal preparation. Koenig rendered this as something to do with having kids, which rather missed the point.

The point was that winning these things isn't getting any easier, and for reasons that aren't always predictable, though they add up just the same. The combination of fatherhood and sustained excellence immediately ushered Agassi to mind, as did the fact that Federer joins the Las Vegas as the only men to claim both Roland Garros and Bercy, and the only men to have won seven of the nine different Masters events (Nadal and Djokovic are both on six). As Chris Masters earlier exclaimed with such vigour, and a breezy contempt for the language: 'His longevity just keeps going on

and on and on!’ Next week in London he will seek to extend his longevity still farther, to become the only man ever to win the year end championships six times. He will enter as defending champion, on a twelve match winning streak, as the finest indoor player in the world. He has held that status for years, of course, but finally he has the sport’s most famous indoor title to prove it.

Luck of the Draw: World Tour Finals 2011

Group A: Novak Djokovic, Andy Murray, David Ferrer, Tomas Berdych

Group B: Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, Mardy Fish

The draw for the World Tour Finals has been released from whatever was restraining it, and the astounding news is that your favourite player is in a far more perilous Group than that other player who you don’t much care for. Unless your favourite player is Roger Federer, that is, in which case Rafael Nadal’s presence in his Group is a sure sign of favouritism, although I cannot say towards whom. Tsonga is caught in the middle. If you’re a fan of Mardy Fish, or you’re an American suddenly helpless in the face of patriotic impulses, you probably feel it’s unfair that the other seven guys are all better tennis players. Something ought to be done about that, and the fact that it hasn’t been speaks volumes of the United States’ declining power. David Ferrer’s fans are presumably just happy he’s there, while the Berdych faithful remain convinced the great Oz will one day grant him a heart.

Glancing shyly over each group, it is frankly hard to see where the upsets are going to come from, although that is the general rule with upsets. Much will depend on Nadal’s indoor form following a long outdoor lay-off, and on Djokovic’s body, and on how well Murray dignifies that strange feeling of Britishness now overwhelming the locals, by finally winning an event they’ve actually heard of. Assuming they’re all fit, the top four will likely justify their foregone qualification by filling out the semifinal berths, just like last year.

There is of course the faint hope that it will play out like the year before, when the upsets no one saw coming arrived in a flurry, and Nikolay Davydenko proved ultimately unplayable. If that’s to happen, it will most likely be Tsonga or Berdych

going on a tear. Ferrer and Fish, much as I cannot cavil at their ranking, will probably not figure heavily. Ferrer largely owes his spot to an Australian Open semifinal back in January and a couple of Masters events in which he faced no one fearsome before the final. Fish has retired from his previous two tournaments. At his age, and given his career, he knows he may never get another shot at it. He'll surely play like he has nothing to lose. Unfortunately, the guys who're here every year play like that nearly all the time, and they're better at it.

Or I could be wrong.

Indecipherable Patterns

World Tour Finals, Day One

(4) Federer d. (7) Tsonga, 6/2 2/6 6/4

(2) Nadal d. (8) Fish, 6/2 3/6 7/6

The first match of the irregular tennis season – the dusky coda of the World Tour and Davis Cup finals – yielded the same result as the final match of the regular one, with Roger Federer overcoming Jo-Wilfried Tsonga. It's a coincidence that would surely bring more pleasure if it actually meant anything. *Einmal ist keinmal*, so the saying goes, but sometimes *zweimal* doesn't mean much either. It is of course the writer's task to tease out meaning from the disorderly flow of events, but it is the lot of the bad writer to uncover meaning where there is none. Federer himself is constantly invited to compare and contrast his losses, and he constantly declines to, to the disappointment of an attendant press gallery, full of writers who will not be convinced there is no pattern to be found.

Of today's match, we might say that, as with the Paris final from last week, Tsonga came out flat and uncertain. We might usefully wonder why he hadn't taken measures to ensure it wouldn't happen again – such as playing differently, for example. But then we have to recall that this isn't his first run-in with Federer in 2011. They have actually met six times this year, and in all but one of those encounters the Frenchman has commenced poorly, dropped the opening set (or two), before recovering with the utmost vigour. Once may not mean anything, or

even twice, but five or six times is hard to ignore. *Fünfmal* probably means *something*. It mostly means he's playing Federer, who is a fast starter, and a pretty handy tennis player. That last factor doubtless figures in the other predominant trend in many of this pair's encounters, which is for Tsonga to collapse when the going gets tight, late in the match. So it proved again today, where a fluffed volley and a double fault proved disastrous.

The patterns were harder to decipher in Rafael Nadal's eventual win over Mardy Fish, since so many of the many errors were truly unforced. They were randomly arrived at, but their outcome proved dreadfully decisive. Fish hit three winners to 16 unforced errors in the first set, and lost it. Everything about the second set was reversed. 16 Winners, four errors, set Fish. Nadal was just kind-of *there*. There was much talk centring on the American needing to believe he could match it with the world No.2, but on a more practical level, he probably just needed to play like he did the last time these two met, when he won. Breaks were doled out freely in the final set, but evenly. A tiebreaker loomed, and then arrived, and Fish neither believed nor executed. Nadal, still *there*, took the win and professed himself lucky afterwards, although he stopped short of comparing himself to an inspired junior.

Doings, Transpiring

World Tour Finals, Day Three

(4) Federer d. (2) Nadal, 6/3 6/0

Andy Murray is out, Roger Federer is up, and Rafael Nadal is down. Mardy Fish is probably out, too - his results so far living down to his own pre-tournament assessment - while Janko Tipsarevic is in, meaning he'll have something to do at the end of those daily speedboat jaunts he's been relishing so much. Doings have been a-transpirin' at the O2, and the week is still young.

Statistics may not always reveal the whole story, but they at least outline the right one in lop-sided matches, though the story is invariably familiar to anyone who has actually watched the match. Still, being told something you already know can have its charms, if it's something you want to hear. Tonight's 26th encounter between

Federer and Nadal was among the most emphatic shellackings in their rivalry. This was already clear from watching it, and the numbers do not pretend otherwise: Federer hit 28 winners, Nadal won 27 *points*. Only nine of those points came in the second set, and almost none of them in a row. There were entire games decided by nothing but winners, mostly but not exclusively from the Swiss forehand. All told, it felt uncannily like last year's final, but more so. Federer's attack wide to the deuce court was similarly comical in its relentlessness, and his cross court backhand not only stood up to Nadal's forehand, but actually dictated to it.

I was put in mind of the Australian Open semifinal of 2007, when Federer's winner count merely equalled Andy Roddick's point-total, a match that is still whispered of with reverence by aficionados of consummate thrashings. Indeed, 2007 was much in the air tonight, and not merely because it has been about four years since Federer sustained this kind of form against a top opponent. Hamburg 2007 marks the last time Federer bagelled Nadal, which astute readers may recall was the match that ended Nadal's record clay-streak of 81 matches. Nadal was gracious after that one - "If anyone is going to beat me, he is the man, no?" - and he was again tonight, refusing to blame anything other than his opponent: "It's funny, but I didn't play really bad. He didn't have one mistake during all the match or two mistakes during all the match. He was playing too aggressive . . . [W]hen Roger plays like this he is better than me, and that's it."

We have to travel back to the Masters Cup of 2007 to find a comparable performance against Nadal, when Federer dismissed his greatest rival 6/4 6/1 in even less time than the dawdling hour he took tonight. Of course, we needn't go back so far to find Nadal reversing the result. Miami earlier this year was a pretty thorough dismantling - less close than its 6/3 6/2 scoreline - although the standout in this area remains the incomparable 2008 French Open final.

Anyway, the upshot is that Federer has become the first player to qualify for the semifinals, although he will still have to play Fish on Thursday, where he will doubtless set out to confirm the American's initial fear of not belonging in so august a company as this. Nadal will have to overcome an in-form Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in order to progress.

(5) Ferrer d. (3) Murray, 6/4 7/5

Following yesterday's loss to David Ferrer - an exercise in who could sustain ineptitude the longest - Murray has today pulled out of the Tour Finals with a groin strain, which is undoubtedly the right move. Ferrer was the only gimme in Group A, and Murray boasts a losing record against his next two opponents, Novak Djokovic and Tomas Berdych. In his press conference, he remarked that he "was trying to find reasons why I should play and no real positives were coming out. I was really unhappy on court." It's his call, of course, but I will point out that 'really unhappy' pretty much sums up how he looked even while winning Shanghai some weeks back, so it's hard to take that as a measure of anything. I've never known anyone to bring such nuanced variation to 'glum'.

Still, it's a colossal bummer for the Scot, who could well lose his No.3 ranking, and for the event, which like all tournaments prefers it when local talent is on show, even if the local chose to be born in another country, and continues to live there. Fans with tickets to tomorrow's day session - in which Murray was to play Berdych - will surely feel the most bummed of all. Instead they will watch Berdych play Janko Tipsarevic. Those two last met in the third round of Bercy a few weeks back. Tickets to the Palais Omnisports de Paris-Bercy were considerably cheaper than to the O2, and the hall was half-empty for that one. For all their manifold differences, Parisians and Londoners can probably feel united in their indifference towards two players they've barely heard of. Perhaps this solidarity will provide some comfort to tomorrow's ticket holders. Perhaps not.

I Could Be Wrong

World Tour Finals, Day Four

(5) Ferrer d. (1) Djokovic, 6/3 6/1

(6) Berdych d. (9) Tipsarevic, 2/6 6/3 7/6

Previewing the World Tour Finals last week, I declared with stentorian finality that David Ferrer would surely not figure heavily, given his dismally winless O2 adventure last year, and that his qualification this year resulted largely from only three strong

performances across the season, spaced a long way apart. Covering myself glibly, I concluded with the proviso that 'I could be wrong', but even as I wrote it I didn't believe it. Yet somehow, that line has turned out to be the most accurate thing I had to say on the matter, although I draw some comfort from the fact that I wrote Mardy Fish off just as thoroughly, and that no one else gave Ferrer much of a shot, either

Honestly, who could have? Sure, he's a nice guy, a fine technician, and so tenacious that he boasts his own page in the *Illustrated Dictionary of Canine Metaphors*. But, drawn in a group with Novak Djokovic, Andy Murray and Tomas Berdych, indoors, he appeared terribly over-matched. The only upset I saw coming would surely come from Berdych. But then the upset I didn't see coming arrived, and, assisted ably by Murray's dislocated groin, Ferrer saw off the world No.3 in two very bent sets. Now he's beaten Djokovic as well, with no help from the latter's groin, and the sets could hardly have been straighter. This was Ferrer at his dogged best, although it is important to resist the lazy assumption that that dogged is all he is. He is not a simple baseline grinder.

One thing that was clear against Murray, and is generally a feature of Ferrer's most dashing wins, was how eager he is to move up into the court, and, prudence permitting, thenceforth venture all the way to the net. He might not reach it, but he's generally on his way as he deals with the short ball. His volleys are compact, though like nearly all modern players he heavily favours the angled drop-volley. This used to be a Spanish thing, and therefore a clay court thing, but is now just a thing, since few know how to punch through the shot. Still, it's effective, since his approaches are exclusively deep. Ferrer only sallied forth five times today, but he found success on every occasion. He was rarely bullied away from the baseline, refused to retreat, and remained determined to push the world No.1 around whenever he could. Thus committed, it turned out he could push Djokovic around a great deal, and Djokovic, strangely, appeared willing to be pushed. The Serbian struck 33 unforced errors, and plenty of those were made on the run, at least in the early going.

Later on, the errors gave up pretending to require a reason at all, and the majority of those found the net. It would be unfair to take the victory away from Ferrer, but it would be misleading to pretend this was Djokovic at his best. It's hard to say what was wrong with him. He looked unusually dispirited, but only if one takes the short

view. He used to look like this all the time when things weren't going his way. Thinking on it, he's looked this way a lot since the US Open, and the part of the season before Flushing Meadows is coming to seem vaguely unreal (although the fourteen billion points buttressing Djokovic's ranking lends it some substance. Oh that's right, we recall - *this man won everything*).

Whether he has a shot left at winning the Tour Finals will depend on how Friday's matches play out. Berdych blew a heartbreaker to Djokovic on Monday, and today won another against Janko Tipsarevic. In both cases match points begged, but ultimately went hungry. Ferrer has already progressed, meaning that Djokovic and Berdych will be fighting for that last semifinal berth. Berdych is currently slightly ahead, and will move through if he beats Ferrer in straight sets in the next match. If he doesn't, and Djokovic overcomes Tipsarevic - as he *should* - the world No.1 will scrape through, and discover Roger Federer waiting. Tipsarevic twice fell heavily in the final point of today's loss, so he'll be feeling a trifle ginger anyway. Is it beyond reason to think he might feel obliged to help Djokovic through by producing a less than a stellar effort? Thankfully, the two Serbs will play each other first on Friday, and so cannot tailor their efforts based on the outcome of the other match.

Not that I'm cynical.

Moving Parts

World Tour Finals, Day Five

(4) Federer d. (8) Fish, 6/1 3/6 6/3

(7) Tsonga d. (2) Nadal, 7/6 4/6 6/3

Mardy Fish has every reason to feel despondent with his 2011 World Tour Finals campaign, leaving the tournament early without winning a match. He was presumably resigned to being abroad for Thanksgiving - that annual nationwide degustation in which the capacity to feed oneself is hopefully appreciated by the 5/6ths of Americans that can - but probably hoped to be somewhere other than aboard a plane over the Atlantic. If he's in search of comfort, or distraction from the

in-flight movie, he can find some in the fact that he won a set in all three of his losses this week, although he'll surely regret not taking two from Rafael Nadal, like everyone else did.

Today he lost to Roger Federer, but there's no shame in that, especially given the latter's form. For parts of the match, Fish was even the superior player. The issue, as it has been all week, is that he couldn't sustain this superiority through the deciding set, which inevitably decided matters. Federer had already earned his semifinal berth, and so had little to motivate him beyond a few hundred ranking points, pride, and the frenzied adulation of the crowd. He didn't look terribly concerned when Fish stormed through the second set, or particularly elated upon winning.

Later, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga joined Federer in the semifinals by taking the requisite two sets from Rafael Nadal. This time it was Nadal's turn to fade sharply in the final set, having hung on grimly to steal a break at the end of the second. Tsonga tightened perceptibly upon stepping up to serve for the match at 5/2 - the court-side microphones picked up the creak and pop of his mighty thews - and conceded a break back in a flurry of double-faults. Fortunately he had a second break in hand, and so looked more wryly amused than stricken, and remained sufficiently loose that he broke Nadal again in the next game, sealing the deal with an off-forehand screamer. Tsonga's forehand is of course a fearsome shot, but it was his deft and skilful volleys that today proved decisive, along with his first serve. As for Nadal, his forehand ranks among the greatest in the sport, and today it was frankly horrible, a discomfiting illustration of the extent to which the Spaniard feeds off confidence, and of how diminished he is without it. He has the Davis Cup final in eight days, and much to think on.

Tsonga, the surprise we saw coming, will most likely face David Ferrer in the semifinal, an outcome surely no one anticipated. Skipping and twirling across the court afterwards, the Frenchman must fancy his prospects. Ferrer will arguably feel the same, notwithstanding that he too has a Davis Cup final looming. He will play the final round robin match tomorrow against Tomas Berdych, which will decide the last semifinalist (either Berdych or Djokovic). While Ferrer probably doesn't care who goes through, he will care very much about not wrecking himself the day before the semifinals - especially with Tsonga having an extra day's rest - and the week before

the Davis Cup. If Berdych takes the first set tomorrow, there is every chance that Ferrer will concede gracefully. A straight sets victory would guarantee Berdych advances, and that Djokovic's greatest season ever ends in disappointment. Meanwhile, Tipsarevic will play Djokovic earlier in the day, and has it within his power to ease his close friend and compatriot's passage further by not winning a set. As ever at the end of the round robin stage, there are plenty of moving parts, guaranteeing that each man's immense pride and urge to win will come up hard against his obligations to friends, countrymen and his own body.

An Earnest Discussion

World Tour Finals, Day Six

(9) Tipsarevic d. (1) Djokovic, 3/6 6/3 6/3

(6) Berdych d. (5) Ferrer, 3/6 7/5 6/1

Without being privy to any inside gossip on the matter, I would be surprised if Novak Djokovic and Janko Tipsarevic did not conduct an earnest man-to-man discussion at some point in the last two days. It conceivably ranged across any number of topics - such as how swell it is to be young, handsome and wealthy - but almost certainly centred on their upcoming round robin tie at the World Tour Finals. They are close chums, and elite tennis players. Unless you're Pete Sampras or Jimmy Connors, these two states are not mutually exclusive for most pros, though if the relationship is to experience strain it would be at times like this.

Tipsarevic could have greatly enhanced Djokovic's prospects of reaching the semifinals by tanking the match. He already had a losing record against the world No.1 (0-3), and could not qualify himself. On the flip side, a win would net Tipsarevic 200 ranking points, and \$120,000, which is hardly chump change, even for handsome young Serbs with underwear modelling contracts. Furthermore, a realistic shot at the world No.1 doesn't come around every day, even when you're the world No.9 and he's your best mate. Plus, well, Djokovic looks buggered, and his semifinal opponent would be Federer, who looks murderous. This entirely theoretical discussion might have yielded any number of outcomes, and all for good reasons.

However, as cynical as I am by nature, I suspect the discussion was brief, and the outcome entailed Djokovic telling Tipsarevic to simply play to win, like any other match. Everything Djokovic has achieved this year, he has earned fairly, and I doubt he would want to see out his greatest season any other way. The way the match played out suggests I'm not wrong, an uncommon occurrence of late.

In the first set, it was Djokovic playing to win, breaking Tipsarevic at 2/1, and holding comfortably thereafter to see out the set. Weariness began to tell in the second, however, as it has all week, and the errors began to flow, and his commitment began to wane. Tipsarevic's tempo accelerated and he grabbed the break at 4/2. Djokovic's drop shot, so effective for much of this season, began to revert to its erstwhile role, which was bailing him out of rallies he couldn't be arsed continuing, an altogether less decisive tactic. By the third set, it looked like he couldn't be arsed continuing with his year, and Tipsarevic took it with a couple of breaks. This ended the No.9's season - exultantly, and wealthier - but Djokovic was obliged to await the outcome of the night match between David Ferrer and Tomas Berdych.

Ferrer has already qualified for the semifinals, but added motivation remained insofar as a win would help him avoid Federer in the semifinals, which all interested parties seem eager to do. For Berdych, a win would see him top Group A. Djokovic, luggage packed, idled impatiently in his hotel, his Learjet doing the same at Gatwick. Then Ferrer took the first set, and went up a break in the second. The Czech could barely scrape points together. The Learjet powered down. Berdych fans collectively groaned, as did Djokovic, who gave up slathering himself in reef oil for the moment. Berdych, suddenly majestic, broke back. Ferrer broke again, then, sloppy, gifted that one back, too. The Learjet's fuel bill was mounting, and Djokovic was a sight, in board shorts and a dressing gown, his luggage in disarray. Berdych took the set, somehow. Ferrer, recalling suddenly that the semifinals would commence in a mere 15 hours and the Davis Cup final in less than a week, went to his bag for the white flag. Bafflingly, he emerged with a pink shirt, so he put that on. Strangely, the effect was much the same. Set Berdych - 6/1 - and the match. Ferrer will face Federer in the first semifinal. Berdych will face Tsonga. Djokovic, 70-6 for the season, is headed for the Maldives, assuming sufficient fuel remains for the trip.

As the Gods Intended

World Tour Finals, Semifinals

(4) Federer d. (5) Ferrer, 7/6 6/3

(7) Tsonga d. (6) Berdych, 6/3 7/5

As a rule, Roger Federer assaults the net with far greater constancy, faith and success against David Ferrer than against any other top player. Like all rules, this one has its exceptions, but today's match was not one of them. The head-to-head between this pair has now progressed to 12-0 in Federer's favour, suggesting that as tactics go, it's a winner. I won't pretend to have seen all of these matches, but I've watched the key ones. The most important of those was the Masters Cup final of 2007, in which Federer relentlessly bullied Ferrer from the court, and refused to yield the forecourt.

This game plan's enduring efficacy means that Federer will surely stick with it for their thirteenth meeting, and it's useful to understand why it works. Naturally predisposed to attack wherever possible, it is unlikely that the Swiss would ever be willing to sit back and rally aimlessly with Ferrer, who can happily keep the ball in for weeks at a time (although he will press an opening if one presents itself). Secondly, I suspect Federer doesn't rate Ferrer's passing shots particularly highly, for all the Spaniard has great wheels and soft hands. Thirdly, Ferrer's groundstrokes lack sufficient penetration and heaviness to pin Federer back, the way a Berdych or a Soderling can. They also mean that Federer can take control of the rally, and work his way to the net. He rarely rushes in desperately against Ferrer, and I can barely recall a chip-charge. The upshot is that Ferrer runs a lot, and Federer takes each match pretty comfortably, even on days like today where nothing else is working that well. Because he isn't sprinting forward like Tsonga, you are never left with the impression that the match is being decided at the net, but the stats afterwards invariably tell the tale. Today he won 15/17 approaches (although one of the two he lost was the point of the match, with Ferrer at his scampering best, retrieving a lob and executing a superb backhand past the net-stranded Federer). For all that Federer was ragged in the early going, he also faced no break points, and barely dropped a point on serve in the second set.

Tomorrow he will contest his 100th tour level final, and aim for his 70th title, and record sixth at the year-end championships. He will play Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, for the eighth time this year, and for the third consecutive Sunday. In utter contrast to today's match, Tsonga will be determined to wrest the net from his opponent wherever possible, notwithstanding that he was out-volleyed by Berdych in today's second semifinal. But when it mattered, Tsonga hurtled forward behind muscled serves and volleyed with daring and virtuosity. With both men determined to annexe the baseline and the forecourt, tomorrow's final will undoubtedly play out as a territorial battle, with the Frenchman's ebullient and often reckless endeavour coming up hard against Federer's easy brilliance and vast experience. There will be monstered forehands, and uncounterable serves. Backhands will be assaulted, and cries of 'Allez' will boom through the O2. For the first time in well over a decade, the final match of the season will be decided by attacking, all-court tennis, just as the gods intended.

Astonishing Numbers

World Tour Finals, Final

(4) Federer d. (7) Tsonga, 6/3 6/7 6/3

Roger Federer has captured his sixth title at the ATP's season ending championships, though it is hard to begrudge him that. For the fifth time he has taken the title without dropping a match, which sounds like an amazing statistic until we recall that he replicated that feat in winning all of his other titles, too. There are 64 of those, making for a grand tally of 70, from an even 100 finals. Astonishing numbers from an astounding career, although what was once a torrent has lately slowed to a trickle, and for a time ceased to flow at all. If asked, Federer would doubtless insist that 2011 has not been a disappointing season, thereby uniting fans and detractors in their scepticism. It *has* been a disappointing season for the sport's greatest player, but at least it has ended in the best possible way. He has gone undefeated since the US Open, producing a 17-match winning streak, including three consecutive titles. The records are again tumbling, like a burbling, stony brook. History, which only stares backward but still misses most of the details, will doubtless elide the finer

points of this run. But the fact that he has won more Tour Finals than any other man is fated to endure.

There was, briefly, a fear he wouldn't. He stepped up to serve out the match at 5/4 in the second set and duly collided with an iceberg, and after watching a match point evaporate in the ensuing tiebreak, there echoed a collective global sigh from the faithful legions, momentarily accelerating the thawing of the polar caps. The capacity for Federer's opponents to soar to vertiginous heights where once they had dutifully plummeted has defined his year, finding grand expression in Tsonga's improbable recovery at Wimbledon, and Djokovic's moribund forehand in New York, a last-gasp shot fired from the gallows. All the signs were there again today. Tsonga, as he had at Wimbledon and in Montreal, hovered over the crevasse and discovered inspiration. Suddenly every Federer serve that wasn't an ace became an invitation. The Swiss could not land a first delivery, and in the grip of a wild pride chose to direct second serves to the Frenchman's forehand, whereupon they were pummelled, as a prelude to being taken out the back and shot. A 5-2 lead in the tiebreak returned to 5-5, match point stumbled in, and Tsonga's forehand again escorted it away to be dealt with.

In Melbourne, it was just clearing 6:20am. Had Federer taken that second set, I could have collapsed into bed for an hour or so. He didn't, so I roundly cursed his ancestors, and peered out at the grey Monday city slowly gaining purpose. A delivery truck had apparently stalled out the front of my house, a situation the driver sought to rectify armed only with colourful language. I suppose things could have been worse. Then again, the experience looked decidedly better in the O2, where the crowd's delirium fundamentally favoured Federer, but proved sympathetic to Tsonga's energy and endeavour if it meant a third set, further justifying the cost of their tickets. Federer is well-loved for the way he makes the impossible look easy, but Tsonga inspires affection for the way he makes the brilliant look fun.

As with the first set, the third set saw a pensive and passive Federer weathering constant pressure on serve. Deuces came and went, but Tsonga couldn't win those crucial return points on the first court. This had been the pattern in the first set, until the Frenchman had punctuated a sequence of flawless service holds with one truly horrible game, ceding the break and with it the set. This was how the pair's round

robin match ended a week ago, and seems to be a fatal pattern. It happened again today. Apparently from nowhere, Federer broke. Tsonga's best comes when he's behind, but he basically sucks at level-pegging through a deciding set. A mighty shout erupted from Federer, half a second before it erupted around the arena. This time, he served it out at love, each point rounded off with a pumped fist.

We saw Federer at his most vicious against Rafael Nadal earlier in the week, but today's Federer barely resembled that one. Partly it was due to Tsonga, who unlike the Spaniard will not grant him so much space in which to work. Partly it was Federer simply having an off-day. But mostly it was a question of intent. Tsonga loves to dictate play, and Federer for the most part allows him to, which seems to me a perilous ploy against so courageous a player, one who doesn't resist the madness of inspiration when it strikes, who can rip a forehand winner down match point, and ride that momentum for a quarter hour stretch. They played eight times this season, including in the first and last tournaments for the season. Federer won six of those encounters, but I wonder how many he would trade for that Wimbledon quarterfinal. Probably most of them, but assuredly not today.

The Davis Cup Final

The F Bomb

Reasoning that tennis might well survive my inattention more or less intact, I had paid it little heed since the Tour Finals concluded last Sunday. Both the sport and I were doubtless better for it. Sadly, my indifference could not last. With the Davis Cup final between Spain and Argentina fast approaching, it seemed imperative that I get up to speed. Some light googling revealed that tennis had indeed survived, primarily because almost nothing had occurred. It's true that both nations had been availing themselves of hourly press conferences, but, depressingly, this did not mean they had anything much to say. Still, I could not help but be intrigued when the very first search result, courtesy of USA Today, revealed that 'Argentina is already putting the pressure on Spain, calling the defending champions ...'

'What?' I demanded. *'What did they call them?'* Pussies? Imperialist pig-dogs? *Whining nancy-boys?* Eagerly I clicked the link. It turned out that Argentina, or the tiny part embodied in its Davis Cup squad, had actually just called Spain 'the favourites'. Oh dear: the dreaded F bomb. Well it had to happen eventually. The teams could only pussy-foot around each for so long before fangs were bared and claws extended. The accusation of favouritism is a serious one in professional tennis, which in terms of sledging clearly has some way to go to catch up with test cricket or UFC or the average retiree's bridge evening. (I was immediately reminded of a list that appeared in a British newspaper last week, arranging Roger Federer's verbal barbs at Andy Murray from over the years into a veritable litany of outrage. It featured such vicious broadsides as: 'Would you consider Andy Murray to be one of your main rivals?' 'No.')

Obviously Spain *are* the favourites, given that they field a superior team, have won the event more than anyone else recently, and are playing at home on clay. Naturally, you wouldn't know it from the Spanish team's tediously over-rehearsed statements, which they somehow delivered with straight faces. Here's world No.5 David Ferrer: 'I'm very tired. I want to stop, but I can't because I have the Davis Cup. It is a disadvantage because we've played more matches. We'll be more tired. We

have to change now to clay courts. The Argentinean guys, they were practising two weeks ago on clay.’ Or how about Rafael Nadal, heavily draped in excessive humility: ‘They have great players, all of which stand out on the circuit, so the only thing we can do is concentrate on reaching the final as prepared as possible and then hope our rivals don’t have an inspired weekend.’ That’s right: Nadal - probably the greatest clay courter in history - is actually insisting his only chance lies in hoping Juan Monaco isn’t inspired.

The commitment to achieving perfect underdog status has by now become so encompassing as to defy reason. Or physics, since the crushing gravity of this much self-deprecating horse-shit will collapse in on itself to form a singularity, forming an event horizon beyond which nothing of the slightest interest can escape. I won’t pretend for a second that Team Argentina is behaving any better, though they are at least justified in asserting their opponent’s superiority, since it is beyond reasonable question. Neither Nadal nor Ferrer have ever lost a singles match on clay in Davis Cup play.

So the week’s build-up has led to nothing more than this. Two groups of grown men who have been so conditioned to cherish their own inferiority that they apparently cannot otherwise compete. The situation was delicately poised, until Spanish great Manolo Santana, who learned his craft long before the image doctors took charge, went and spoiled it all by telling the truth: ‘We [Spain] are superior on clay, grass, hard courts and, if necessary, even on roller skates.’

The Spanish team’s sudden anxiety was palpable. It was exactly the kind of wild, unvetted remark that risked firing the terrifying Juan Monaco up. Then who knows what might happen? Nadal beware.

Thrown Under the Hooves

Davis Cup Final, Day One

Nadal d. Monaco, 6/1 6/1 6/2

Ferrer d. del Potro, 6/2 6/7 3/6 6/4 6/3

Juan Monaco, in what he himself declared to be the most important tennis match of his career, was thrashed by a magnificent Rafael Nadal in the opening rubber of the 2012 Davis Cup final. According to the official Spanish line, rehashed with soporific frequency all week, this outcome was not merely unthinkable, but apparently unsayable. Only yesterday, during the second or third of his daily press conferences, Nadal insisted that his best hope lay with solid preparation, and hoping the opposition didn't 'get inspired'. In other words, he'd do his best, but when you're facing a guy like Monaco it really isn't in your hands.

The issue isn't that Nadal says these kinds of things, or even that he believes them. It's that the people he proffers these opinions to accept them, carefully transcribe them into their notepads or notebooks, and faithfully report them. One hopes they don't believe them, but the fact that they don't question them – whether at the time or in the subsequent article – does make you wonder. But then, what would be the point? If someone was to snort derisively and demand of Nadal whether he actually believes what he's saying, the response would doubtless be curt, and heavily favour phrases such as 'respecting your opponent'.

After the match (the most important of his career), Monaco looked crushed, but that's ok. Crushing one's opponent is considered fair play. Conversely, speaking honestly and realistically about the likelihood of it happening is considered disrespectful. By this measure, the betting markets showed Monaco no respect at all. A modest wager on Nadal losing would have fed an Argentinean family for a month, had it been successful.

Given the inevitability of the trampling, one questions the wisdom of throwing Monaco under *el Toro's* hooves in the first place. The hope, presumably, was that the simple joy of the activity would occupy the bull for some time, and would preserve the constitutionally-delicate David Nalbandian for the doubles and, if

necessary, the reverse singles. Argentina's decision was thus a pragmatic one, based on the realistic assumption that Nadal would not be losing this match in a fit. It was a long shot, but all their shots are long this weekend. Facing Monaco instead of Nalbandian put the matter beyond whatever minor doubt still persisted, although it did mean Nadal had to toil harder to assert his underdog status, his sternest challenge so far. He rose to it.

For his part, David Ferrer stayed more in touch with reality, although he forwent no opportunity to evoke his exhaustion, and to point out that just last week he was playing indoors on an English hardcourt. Both points are undoubtedly true. However, the implication that the transition to clay presents a titanic challenge is generally overblown, and the reportage has largely granted Ferrer the breadth of his claims. Somehow it is forgotten that he was still playing tennis on a tennis court in London, and not performing the Ice Capades on a pogo stick. As for his tiredness, it is undeniable that he did play in London last week, and none of the Argentines did. But he only played four best-of-three matches, and only one of those went to a third set (which Berdych won in about 20 minutes). It was with Ferrer's putative exhaustion in mind that I watched him overrun Juan Martin del Potro in the second rubber today, easily outlasting his opponent as the match entered its fifth hour.

Del Potro looked as crushed as Monaco. Ferrer was exultant. Spain is 2-0 up, having overcome Nadal's lingering *Weltschmerz*, Ferrer's bone-weariness and the unbearable lightness of its own low expectations. The home team is on the cusp of snatching victory from the very jaws of victory.

A Snowflake in the Desert

Davis Cup Final, Day Two

Nalbandian / Schwank d. Verdasco / Lopez, 6/4 6/2 6/3

Whatever else happens, we can at least commend Argentina for getting one decision right. Playing Nalbandian in the doubles was the right move. Spain's decision to play Feliciano Lopez and Fernando Verdasco – the dreamboat duo that served them so ineptly in the semifinals – was more problematic. If Argentina goes on to win this

final, these decisions will be widely lauded and reviled respectively. Of course, their chance of winning remains vanishingly small, but Nalbandian and Eduardo Schwank have at least given them something. The snowflake has returned from hell, but now finds itself stranded in the Upper Gobi.

Mostly what they gave today was unflappable assurance and technical solidity. This was not virtuosic doubles by any stretch, but it was a remarkably accomplished performance given the circumstances. The Davis Cup ranks among Nalbandian's most coveted cups, and Argentina was 0-2 down, in Spain. This pair had also never played together before. The pressure was immense. Verdasco and Lopez, by contrast, play together a lot, sometimes in doubles, but could not have looked less cohesive.

The psychic lacerations first inflicted on Verdasco by Milos Raonic have since grown infected and spread to his entire game. Even at his best, baseline slugging was basically all he had, but today he was frequently out-rallied by Schwank. Against Nalbandian he looked completely helpless. He was no better at the net or overhead. Meanwhile, clay isn't Lopez' best surface, but his lefty serve is his best shot anywhere. Today he was out-served by both Argentineans.

Spain will doubtless regain the coveted cup tomorrow, thereby breaking Nalbandian's heart. Verdasco and Lopez will be there ecstatically sprawled on the court with the rest, having failed to win a doubles set in the semifinal or final, proving emphatically that the world's best Davis Cup squad is Rafael Nadal, David Ferrer and anyone.

On Their Day, On Their Clay

Davis Cup Final, Day Three

Nadal d. del Potro, 1/6 6/4 6/1 7/6

The final stroke of the 2011 tennis season was a forehand winner by Rafael Nadal, and it won the Davis Cup for Spain. Neither occurrence is especially rare - he has hit over 18,000 forehand winners in his career (probably), and Spain has won this event

three times in the last four years - and so it seemed mainly noteworthy that they had yet to coincide. Somehow, this is the first time Nadal has ever taken the decisive rubber in a final. It was easily the most remarkable thing to happen this weekend.

Of course, we have grown so inured to the top players winning everything in a straight sets canter that when Juan Martin del Potro galloped to a 6/1 first set, the betting markets lurched. Hope and dread rose sharply in each respective camp. Holding David Nalbandian back for the fifth rubber suddenly seemed like a masterstroke, instead of what it actually was: a colossal shame. Del Potro broke to open the second set, and everyone except the professional tennis players lost their heads. The pros knew that while Nadal hardly ever loses a set on clay, when he does that doesn't mean he's at all close to losing the match. He didn't look especially panicked, and del Potro wasn't celebrating. He knew retribution was coming. The second set remained tight, but Nadal broke back, and went on with it. Then in the third he briefly took flight. However, the fourth was all del Potro, until he served for it, and was broken. Nadal served for it, and was broken as well. The tiebreak ensued, and suddenly the towering Argentinean was truly broken, ruinously, not managing a point.

Del Potro looked forlorn, or in the weary, teary place beyond it. His year had finished precisely as it unfolded. He had returned to a place where he could challenge the best, but he could no longer seem to beat them. Nalbandian probably can't either, but he still looked sorely and sourly unused. The Spanish players were of course delighted, but not excessively so. They've been here before. They didn't shave their heads. Verdasco and Lopez hadn't the good grace to look sheepish, although it's important to bear in mind that the Davis Cup is not just about the final. It is a team event played over the whole year, and everyone's contribution matters. These guys have thus been dead weight for a long time, and it is a measure of Spain's regal dominance that it hasn't mattered at all. Indeed, as with all kindly monarchs, we should instead appreciate Spain's magnanimity in providing a pair of lovable jesters for the halftime entertainment.

But as ever for even the most benign of dictatorships, beneath the veneer of jolly ineptitude lurks the threat of lethal force. Its enforcers are Nadal and Ferrer, who have proved once more that although one good player might win a tie now and

again, two great players will put it beyond doubt. Spain is once again the Davis Cup champions, as they should be. On their day, and on their clay, they are without question the finest tennis nation on Earth.

Summary

An Irresistible Urge

Ensconced in the window of my preferred cafe, I gaze idly out at the world flowing past, the river we cannot visit twice. According to my opinionated phone, the air out there is 20.4C, and wafting lightly from the north, invariably a portent of heat to come. The Australian summer is uncoiling itself with seamless and practiced grace, and this ideal day is already perfect for tennis. Nevertheless, the rhythms of a lifetime have taught me to associate flawless early summer days with the end of the tennis season, since my hemisphere has little say in the when and where of world sports. Revolutionary urges stir torpidly in my heart. Occupy the northern hemisphere! I order another coffee.

Tennis will be here soon enough. It is a scant three weeks until those ostensibly meaningful exhibition events in Perth and Abu Dhabi commence, and then 2012 is underway, unfurling and snapping tautly in the endless zephyr. Until then there are only meaningless ones, performed by hammy, weary players who short weeks ago bemoaned the godless length of the season; low-brow vaudeville for very good causes.

The rest are retuning their bodies. The miracle of Twitter means we are no longer spared the minutiae of their daily toil. Melzer's body held up well today, apparently. Raonic is in Spain, Fish is in LA, and Dolgoplov is already in Australia, I think. Roger Rasheed is not a player, or even a coach anymore, but he loves to share and his vapid tweets are the stuff of fridge magnets: 'Don't play safe in life, that will only blunt your progress, take risks & surprise yourself - everyone can achieve if YOU are truly [sic] willing.' Luddites are mercifully shielded from this grade of tedium. The truly elite, Rasheed's willingly self-startled risk-embracers, have retreated to their beaches and pleasure palaces, and parlours, to count up their honey and dine on bread and money. Federer is doubtless in Dubai, Nadal in Mallorca, Djokovic in the Maldives. Murray is now promoting something called 'road tennis' (of course).

There is, in short, nothing happening, so little in fact that the news sites have been reduced to reporting the confirmed entries for mandatory events, or the astounding

news that Lleyton Hewitt's wife is very important to him. The season's end provides a long perspective, and the dearth of actual news leaves more than adequate space. With space and time in which to operate, the ether is thick with summation. We are invited to contemplate Djokovic's year, or Nadal's, or Fognini's. What did it all *mean*? Lists of the year's top matches and finest moments appear daily. Sports Illustrated did so, but forgot to include tennis (earning the fatal ire of Brad Gilbert and Darren Cahill). For anyone presuming to write about tennis, the urge to recapitulation is basically irresistible.

I do not presume to be above such urges.

The Match of the Year 2011

Here are my top ten matches for the 2011 season, as I saw them.

Lists such as this are inevitably skewed towards the top players, for reasons that should be more or less self-evident. First, the top players are at the top due to their proven capacity to play well often, and the very top players can even play well when their opponent is. Lower ranked players tend to take it in turns, although as the ranking number gets bigger many grow disinclined to play well at all.

Secondly, the top players are more like to be competing in the biggest arenas, at the most dramatic stages of the most prestigious tournaments. Djokovic's astonishing defeat of Federer in the US Open semifinal only gained from taking place on the world's largest tennis stadium, packed and roaring. Conversely, Djokovic was unbeaten for the year coming into the French Open semifinal, and everyone in the world knew it. The quality of play counts for a lot, but context and atmosphere still matter. In extreme cases, they count for everything:

10. Fognini d. Montanes, Roland Garros, Fourth Round. 4/6 6/4 3/6 6/3 11/9

This match will surely cement the charismatic and polarising Fognini's reputation among the foremost tragicomic figures in the sport. Barely mobile due to severe cramps in the fifth set, Fognini began lustily swinging at every ball he could lay a racquet on. This turned out to be almost all of them, since the cramps were the rare

contagious kind, and had spread to Montanes' brain. Deploying the double fault with a potency unheard of since Kournikova, Fognini lurched and limped his way to an impossible win.

9. Nadal d. Karlovic, Indian Wells, Quarterfinal. 5/7 6/1 7/6

Nadal began the first Masters Series event of the year in patchy form, but was ably assisted by an utterly collapsed draw, which meant he would face no seeds en route to the final. However, returning from injury, Karlovic was in unprecedented touch, posting wins over Simon and Ferrer in which he had frankly and shockingly outplayed each from the baseline. His superior power rocked Nadal back in the first set, before Nadal dialled in his returns to super-human levels in the second. The third lifted to an ecstatic tiebreak, with Nadal saving a match point.

8. Gasquet d. Federer, Rome, Quarterfinal. 4/6 7/6 7/6

From a set and a break up, Federer surely fancied his chances, especially against a man he had not lost to in over six years, and who can generally be relied upon to fold when behind. But not this day. Gasquet's backhand was superb, as it always is. The real revelation was his forehand, which he lashed with reckless intensity. Do not for a moment imagine Federer played badly. Gasquet was exceptional.

7. Soderling d. Hewitt, Wimbledon, Third Round. 6/7 3/6 7/5 6/4 6/4

Much as he had against del Potro in 2009, former champion Hewitt looked to have the grass court measure of his opponent. Soderling, constantly forced to hit forehands from unfamiliar parts of the court, was driven to roaring distraction. The adjustment came in the third, when the Swede drained some of the excessive pace from his shots, and patiently forced Hewitt to defend. It was a comprehensive and mature fightback from the Swede, especially on his least favoured surface.

6. Djokovic d. Nadal, Miami, Final. 4/6 6/3 7/6

Djokovic defeated Nadal in six finals this year, after having never done it before at all. Miami was the second of them, and it more or less recreated the Indian Wells final of some weeks prior, but with all the settings dialled up. Nadal's form was stronger, the court, air and balls were slower, and the physicality of the play was more demanding. The importance of this match should not be overlooked, for it set

up the clay finals to come, and established that Djokovic could outlast a truly committed Nadal.

5. Soderling d. Kohlschreiber, Rotterdam, Second Round. 6/3 5/7 7/6

For some reason, this pair have always pushed each other to the limit, even as Soderling's career has taken flight, and Kohlschreiber's has remained earthbound due to flashy inconsistency. This was their fourth encounter, and all had so far gone to third set tiebreakers. On a fast indoor court in Rotterdam, Soderling finally triumphed in a sadly-forgotten encounter of astounding shot-making and jaw dropping power.

4. Murray d. Tsonga, Queens, Final. 3/6 7/6 6/4

This was Tsonga at his mercurial best, producing the finest display of dive-volleying I have ever seen, Becker included. Murray was driven to the edge, but somehow snatched the second set when the Frenchman dipped, and then expanded into an unplayable colossus in the third. It was Murray's first title of the year, and well deserved. And although he lost, Tsonga's Queen's campaign set his season truly in motion, including a tremendous Wimbledon effort just weeks later.

3. Djokovic d. Federer, US Open, Semifinal. 6/7 4/6 6/3 6/2 7/5

To an extent, the top three matches in this list are interchangeable, although all deserve inclusion for varying reasons. This was arguably the year's most dramatic encounter, and also its most improbable. Who could have predicted that Djokovic would defeat Federer in the US Open semifinals two years running, both times 7/5 in the fifth after saving two match points? This time round, the two match points occurred with Federer serving at 40-15, and landing both first serves. And who could have predicted that Federer would bow out of consecutive majors after leading two sets to love, something that had not happened in his entire career? Djokovic's forehand return winner on the first of the match points remains one for the ages.

2. Djokovic d. Murray, Rome, Semifinal, 6/1 3/6 7/6

It was May, and for the first time in the season Djokovic looked in serious danger of actually losing a tennis match. Murray, on the other hand, had barely won since January, having indulged in his annual post-Melbourne slump. The first set

conformed to the form guide, but then Murray began inexorably to suck the Serbian into his psychic mire. Djokovic pulled himself free with his final gasp.

1. Federer d. Djokovic, Roland Garros, Semifinal. 7/6 6/3 3/6 7/6

While (debatably) not as dramatic as their US Open classic, this one was unquestionably higher quality, and it had a lot more riding on the outcome. Unresolved narrative tendrils whipped fitfully, searching for satisfaction. With victory, Djokovic would have eclipsed McEnroe's 27 year record for greatest start to a season, reached his first French Open final, and deposed Nadal as the world No.1. I have the full match on my hard drive, and an excellent highlights package, and the two are virtually identical for long stretches. The pace is staggering, the shot-making extraordinary, and the pressure, as the light died and the riotous Parisians realised that any fifth set would have to wait until the next day, was immense. Djokovic broke and served for the fourth. Federer, knowing he had to finish it in the twilight gloom, produced a colossal game to break back, and closed with a majestic tiebreak. His mistake in New York was to prepare only two match points. In Paris he cooked up three, and smoked an ace down the T on the last of them. Djokovic had finally tasted defeat.

Honourable Mentions

Djokovic d. Nadal, US Open, Final.

Gruelling, yet pedestrian. It might have been a classic had Nadal not faded so sharply, and had they hit the ball a bit harder.

Weintraub d. Raonic, Davis Cup, World Group Play Off.

This is what Davis Cup is all about.

Soderling d. Almagro, Rome, Second Round.

A minor classic, with a wonderful matchpoint save.

Dodig d. Nadal, Montreal, Second Round.

A stunning upset. Dodig has testicles the size of cantaloupes.

Tsonga d. Federer, Wimbledon, Quarterfinal.

Federer cruising to a routine victory, when Tsonga rises to that rarefied place usually haunted by Federer himself.

Murray d. Haase, US Open, Second Round.

A match entirely on Haase's racquet. As far as Murray was concerned, that proved the ideal place for it.

Worst Matches of the Year**Nadal d. Verdasco, Cincinnati, Third Round.**

Just bad. And long. So very, very bad and long.

Djokovic d. Troicki, Paris Masters, Third Round.

How far would you go to not beat Djokovic?

Less Dramatic Than It Sounds

Notwithstanding that they are collectively termed a 'series', the nine Masters 1000 events peppering the ATP calendar share little beyond the volume of ranking points they offer, and the fact that attendance at them is mandatory. These factors are not insignificant, and for yet another year have helped see them dominated by the top four - especially Novak Djokovic - but beyond that they really are a pretty heterogeneous collection, serving several quite disparate purposes.

Of the nine events, eight fall evenly into two distinct categories. Four - Madrid, Rome, Canada and Cincinnati - serve as lead-ups to majors, whilst another four - Indian Wells, Miami, Shanghai and Paris - function as culminations of short mini-tours themselves, with their success depending largely on the allure of location and surface respectively. They do not offer equal prize- money or prestige, and nor do they boast similar pedigree.

Astute readers will have noted that nine minus eight leaves one, and that there is a Masters event left over. The event in question is Monte Carlo, which serves no discernible purpose beyond guaranteeing Rafael Nadal's Masters tally is augmented

by at least one each year. Occurring over a month before the French Open, its value as a warm-up is questionable. Now, there's nothing wrong with the event itself, and the location is spectacular, among the most striking in the sport. However, if space was to be created for a grass court Masters - one can hope - then the entire clay season could usefully be shifted forward a week, with Monte Carlo demoted to 500 status and run alongside Barcelona. On the other hand, tradition counts for a lot in this part of the world - the event is a venerable one - and money talks everywhere, so it is unlikely that any shift is forthcoming. But I digress.

In any case, here is the roundup of the Masters 1000 'Series' for 2011.

Indian Wells

Winner: Novak Djokovic

Confirmation of Andy Murray's annual post-Australian Open slump came when he fell in straight sets to Donald Young. Ryan Harrison announced his arrival in an excellent encounter with Milos Raonic. Ivo Karlovic came within a whisker of upsetting Nadal in a third set tiebreaker. Federer lost a fraught semifinal to Djokovic and with it the No.2 ranking. Djokovic defeated Nadal for the first time in a final, outlasting the Spaniard physically. The doubles event took the show, with most of the top ten singles players participating, thereby demonstrating that the top doubles players are not necessarily the *best* doubles players.

Miami

Winner: Novak Djokovic

Apparently not rejuvenated by the shift from desert to swamp, Murray's sojourn in the wilderness continued by losing to Alex Bogomolov Jr. Plenty of other seeds tumbled early. Roddick, defending champion, fell sourly to Pablo Cuevas. Mardy Fish became the highest ranked American for the first time, and set about disavowing his status. Kevin Anderson won plenty of fans, gallant against an untouchable Djokovic. Federer and Rochus were forced onto court well after midnight, and left under an hour later. Nadal smashed Federer in the semifinal, and again fell to Djokovic in the final, and was again outlasted. There seemed to be a pattern here.

Monte Carlo

Winner: Rafael Nadal

Djokovic, still unbeaten for the year, pulled out prior to commencement, but vowed to help out with the player's party, which was generous. Ferrer ambled through the hole he left in the draw. Nadal took the event for a record 380th time, his first title since Tokyo the year before. Murray, wounded, signalled a return from the wild, reaching the semifinals and managing one majestic set against Nadal. Federer tried out some things against Melzer in a windy quarterfinal, but none of them worked, so he lost, his first loss before the semifinals in nine months. Raonic proved he could play on clay, and Verdasco proved he couldn't.

Madrid

Winner: Novak Djokovic

The talk of the week was altitude, and just how much of it the Spanish capital has. There's surely an export industry there, if only to rapidly submerging Pacific islands. Djokovic defeated Nadal in the final - again - recording his first win over the world No.1 on clay. Thomaz Bellucci was the surprise semifinalist - sashaying through Murray's quarter - where he took a set from Djokovic, which is one more than Nadal managed. The pattern we sensed in Miami turned out to be that Djokovic won every time he played.

Rome

Winner: Novak Djokovic

A return to sea level, and order was restored, except that Nadal almost lost early to Paolo Lorenzi. Soderling and Almagro fought out a classic, as did Gasquet and Federer. Both were eclipsed by the barnstorming semifinal between Murray and Djokovic, which Djokovic only salvaged in a third set tiebreak, saving match point. Utterly spent, there was little chance he'd have anything left for the final against Nadal. Except he did, and won in straight sets. The issue, clearly, was that Nadal now had no idea how to play Djokovic, who had closed to within spitting distance of the No.1 ranking. This was easily the best of the Masters events this season.

Montreal

Winner: Novak Djokovic

New No.1 Djokovic's fifth Masters title for the season set a new record. Ivan Dodig

upset Nadal early, and Anderson did the same for Murray, the defending champion. Tsonga proved his Wimbledon win over Federer wasn't a fluke by doing it again. The story of the week was Janko Tipsarevic, a late bloomer ready to make his mark, storming to the semifinals. Mardy Fish's strong US Summer Series continued, and he grabbed a set from Djokovic in the final.

Cincinnati

Winner: Andy Murray

Nadal and Verdasco fought out the poorest match of the year early, an encounter of such sustained subterranean quality that it almost defied belief, like the pair's Australian Open 2009 semifinal played out in Bizarro World. Fish finished Nadal off shortly after. Overcoming early motivational issues against Monfils, Djokovic eased through to the final, as did Murray. The Scot began stronger, and took the first set. Then the weather arrived, the players left the court, and Djokovic didn't come back. The title was Murray's, but with the US Open a week away, the story was the Serbian's shoulder.

Shanghai

Winner: Andy Murray

Murray capped a clean sweep through Asia with a near-effortless defence of his Shanghai title, snarling and cussing his way through any number of situations in which he was in no real danger of losing. He moved to No.3 in the rankings. Semifinal runs saw Feliciano Lopez close on the top 20 and Kei Nishikori finally realise Project 45.

Paris Indoors

Winner: Roger Federer

Federer's first Bercy title was naturally the *histoire de la semaine*, with supplementary narrative provided by several precautionary retirements (Djokovic and Fish), and the improbable run of John Isner, who blew three match points in the semifinal. As ever, the legion of Frenchman fell early, barring one, who pushed through to the final. The One this time round was Tsonga. Paris also determined the final three qualifiers for the World Tour Finals - Tsonga was among them - all at the precise moment Berdych saw off a gagging Tipsarevic in the third round. It was less dramatic than it sounds.

Rise and Fall

The immediately striking feature of this year's ATP top ten is that it bears a suspiciously strong resemblance to last year's. Expanding the selection, the same holds true for the top fifty, and even the top hundred. Perusing the lists side by side - a mesmerically dull diversion, I can assure you - reveals that while there are inevitable exceptions, the prevailing theme has been rearrangement rather than rejuvenation.

Whether the rearrangement has merely been of deckchairs on the Titanic depends largely on your point of view. Some insist the sport has never been stronger, for all that the same guys keep winning everything. Others suggest that for a top sport to go so long without wholesale renewal is at best numbing, and at worst foreshadows an iceberg on the horizon. I am temperamentally averse to conspiracy theories and doomsday proclamations, and find myself without a strong opinion. There have been years when every winner commuted in directly from left field, but I don't recall being more interested as a consequence. In any case, while the top four have again dominated, no one foresaw the way it would unfold. And for all that the exceptions to the general hegemony have been sparse, they've also been fascinating, particularly the youngsters on the rise, and the host of players claiming maiden titles. More on those later.

For now, some numbers. Here are the players who have gained the most ranking points in the last twelve months (with their point gain in brackets). This list demonstrates whose 2011 was the biggest improvement over their 2010:

1. Novak Djokovic (7,390)
2. Juan Martin del Potro (2,135)
3. Jo-Wilfried Tsonga (1,990)
4. Janko Tipsarevic (1,660)
5. Andy Murray (1,620)
6. David Ferrer (1,190)
7. Gilles Simon (1,160)
8. Alexandr Dolgoplov (985)
9. Mardy Fish (974)

10. Milos Raonic (910)

Unsurprisingly, Djokovic is on top, although even for those of us intimate with the figures they remain astounding. While Federer finished with a higher tally in 2006, he started from a much higher base, as the undisputed world No.1. Djokovic has been an elite player for years, but a gain like this reveals just how profoundly his breakout season has come from nowhere. Del Potro's place is hardly surprising, since he is also an elite player, and he had almost nothing to defend this year. Both Ferrer and Fish have built on strong results last season, and have become noted presences at bigger events. Gilles Simon hasn't, but he is somewhere back where he should be after a year marred by fatherhood.

Janko Tipsarevic is arguably the big story here. He finished 2010 ranked 49th, with 935 points to his name, having spent his final match of the year benched while Troicki won Serbia the Davis Cup. He finished this year ranked forty places higher at No.9, reached five tour finals, and actually won a few, which proved to be a refreshing change. His final match of the year was at the O2, where he took out Djokovic. That can be regarded as belated revenge for dozens of prior losses, or, radically, it can just be viewed as a tennis match.

Andy Murray gained almost as many points as Tipsarevic, and consequently saw his ranking soar from No.4 all the way to No.4. To further illustrate this - since the concept of a number not changing is just too complicated to grasp in one go - here are the top hundred players who have seen the largest ranking jump this season. Murray features nowhere on this list. The first number is the ranking jump over the last twelve months. The current ranking is in brackets.

1. Cedrik-Marcel Stebe - 297 (81)
2. Juan Martin del Potro - 257 (11)
3. Bernard Tomic - 166 (42)
4. Dmitry Tursonov - 157 (40)
5. Flavio Cipolla - 136 (75)
6. Alex Bogomolov Jr. - 132 (34)
7. Milos Raonic - 125 (31)
8. Matthew Ebden - 97 (86)

9. Lukas Rosol - 94 (70)

10. Ryan Harrison - 94 (79)

A disparate collection, to be sure, and it would be quixotic to seek a unifying theme here. Del Potro and Tursonov are accomplished tour mainstays returning from injury, although the magnitude of their accomplishments is in inverse proportion to their flamboyance (Tursonov is hilarious). Milos Raonic features on both lists (unsurprisingly), but here he is joined by Tomic and Harrison. I will discuss this group in further detail soon, but for now it is worth pointing out that Raonic's dramatic ascent was achieved in a season abbreviated by injury, suggesting he has a ways to rise yet.

Matthew Ebden is an interesting case: a kind of Australian Ferrer on under-drive, his ranking is testament to how even quintessential journeymen are only ever one strong run away from a year in the big time. He scrapped his way through qualifying to the quarterfinals of the Shanghai Masters, and there gave an honest account of himself against a rampant Murray, and for that has been rewarded with a year's worth of direct entry into the majors, and a solid base from which to ascend higher should the gods smile again.

Young German lefty **Cedrik-Marcel Stebe** tops this list, although it was a steady year on the Challenger circuit that push him arse-backwards onto the main tour. Final and shocking impetus arrived when he romped to the title at the ATP Challenger Tour Finals, overcoming such A-list journeymen as Dudi Sela and Rui Machado. He posted four wins at tour level this season, and I saw two of them, and both were over Nikolay Davydenko. The prevailing vibe was that this demonstrated just how far the Russian had fallen, and I remain more or less inclined to this view. However, it is harder to defend when I note that he also beat Juan Carlos Ferrero in straight sets on clay, although the fact that he did the same to Fabio Fognini and Thomas Muster could mean anything.

Alex Bogomolov Jr. also rates a mention, although he has hardly gone unmentioned of late. If Ebden's example is suggestive, then Bogomolov's is exemplary. A Challenger fixture for nigh on a decade, prior to last May Bogomolov had only fleetingly cracked the top 100, and that was eight years ago. I can hardly

recall not seeing him grinding away at the Australian Open qualifying event each year, and on at least three occasions I have wondered aloud how this diminutive fellow with no appreciable gifts beyond doggedness and a certain flair for miswearing hats summoned the will to continue. Like so many Americans, his faith in the big break rewarding honest toil was apparently unshakable. It turns out his faith was justified. He is somehow two withdrawals away from an Australian Open seeding. And now, having realised the American Dream, Bogomolov has committed to pursuing a Russian one.

Next I will discuss those players who fell away in season 2011. Andy Roddick will not go unmentioned.

Previously I discussed the players who had compiled their most memorable season in 2011, at least relative to 2010. Today I'll talk about those who fell most sharply away. There are various reasons why this might happen. Some players subside as a matter of course, their allotted year in the light having expired. Others, veterans, will sense the race outrunning them for some time, and are finally trampled underfoot. Some get injured. Some just don't play very well.

Here are the players who shed the most ranking points in 2011. The number in brackets is their points *loss* for the season.

1. Robin Soderling (3460)
2. Rafael Nadal (2855)
3. Mikhail Youzhny (1815)
4. Andy Roddick (1725)
5. Fernando Verdasco (1690)
6. Jurgen Melzer (1615)
7. Sam Querrey (1271)
8. Roger Federer (975)
9. Marcos Baghdatis (845)
10. Ernests Gulbis (720)

Ever since **Robin Soderling's** ascent in 2009, the top eight has looked sturdier for having him in it. Now that glandular fever has buggered his season and his ranking,

it feels as though a crucial link between the truly elite and the rest is missing. Clearly he wasn't beating the top four with any regularity, but he was a sufficiently imposing quarterfinal presence to keep them honest. He has already withdrawn from next year's Australian Open (where he has never performed well) and Brisbane (where he is the defending champion). However far he has already fallen, he has some way to go before he can begin climbing again. For a time his mid-career breakthrough was the most intriguing tale in the sport. Let's hope he can tell it again.

Rafael Nadal's 2010 season ranks among the most accomplished in the history of the sport. It would have been a tough act to sustain for more than a season, and thus it is essential to remind ourselves that but for the grace of Djokovic, Nadal's 2011 might well have eclipsed it. There is no way of knowing either way, and to speculate more than idly is the business of the fanatical fan. Djokovic *did* happen, and Nadal merely registered a season that 99% of professional players in history would envy. He is still No.2 in the world - a not unfamiliar position - despite jettisoning a huge number of points. To put this volume into perspective, if world No.9 Janko Tipsarevic was to shed as many points as Nadal has, he would no longer be ranked as a tennis player, and still owe some change. Like Nadal, **Roger Federer** dropped points and fell a place in the rankings, momentarily departing the top three for the first time in over eight years. A mighty finish to the season staunched the wound in time, and provided some confusing signals heading into 2012.

Andy Roddick has been on the slide for years, and the fact that the gradient has hitherto been so shallow and smooth speaks amply of his fighting qualities. It also demonstrates how the constant and deliberate effort to purge his game of all dynamism has ensured he mostly beats those ranked below him, but can barely trouble those ranked higher. With the exception of Ferrer at the US Open, Roddick's efforts against the best players were dire. He was savaged by Nadal in the very next round in New York, beaten up by Federer in Basel, and mugged by Murray at Queens. Indeed, Ferrer had already exacted 'prevenge' by cleaning Roddick up in the Davis Cup, on a slick court in Austin. The difference in 2011, and the reason why Roddick briefly departed the top 20, is that he has grown increasingly vulnerable to players below him, such as Lopez at Wimbledon. Holding the floodgates shut as proved an exacting task for many years, and as he now rounds on thirty, it might well

have broken him. He will always have his serve, and it will always remain a deal-breaker on fast courts, but barring a miracle run at SW19 I suspect Roddick's slide will only accelerate.

Youzhny and **Melzer** are classic examples of players who'd earned a year in the big time - Youzhny had been there before - but inevitably plummeted once their hauls went undefended. I am partial to both guys, particularly Youzhny, and so have been saddened to see it happen. My feelings regarding **Verdasco** are more ambivalent. He lasted a full two years in the top ten, but ever since Milos Raonic broke his will in San Jose and Memphis, he has barely put together consecutive weeks of real tennis.

When **Ernesto Gulbis** won LA, defeating del Potro and Fish en route, there was a pervasive sense that he had finally found his way. Forgotten in all the hoopla was the fact that LA is a tournament whose best days are long past. Forgotten since has been Gulbis himself, who returned to his feckless shenanigans the following week, and has hardly been heard of since. Meanwhile the ATP website ran an inspirational puff piece on **Marcos Baghdatis** at the start of the season, the overarching theme of which was that the streaky Cypriot was finally prepared to buckle down and become a proper tennis player, for realies. The video mainly consisted of him doing sit-ups on a perfect beach, although whether this was meant to stand in metonymically for a broader effort, or whether this was the true extent of his regimen, was never made clear. The upshot is that Baghdatis has attained his lowest ranking in six years, and worked damn hard to get there.

Surely It Cannot Continue

There is a theoretical maximum to the number of points that any single tennis player can accrue in a season, and for a long time this year Novak Djokovic was hell-bent on getting closer to it than anyone ever has. If he had his way, that theoretical number would become an actual one next to his name, or he would kill himself trying. As it was, he did almost kill himself. An on-court collapse the weekend after the US Open foreshadowed a weak end to the season. Consequently, the number buffering his ranking is large (13,630), but it isn't the largest there has been.

Had it been larger, Djokovic might well have taken the apparently coveted Sportsperson of the Year prize doled out by Sports Illustrated, one of the few sporting publications sufficiently august to boast a swimsuit edition. (As it was, the *palme* went to a couple of college basketball coaches, which was doubtless nice for them. Those of us who chose to be born elsewhere in the world were united in vague surprise that Djokovic didn't win anyway, and continued bafflement at the strange interest Americans have in university sports.) He's probably a shoe-in for the Laureus award, anyway, assuming he can overcome spirited opposition from Sebastian Vettel and the long-serving bowling coach for the Gauteng second XI, who've had a good run of late, almost winning several close games.

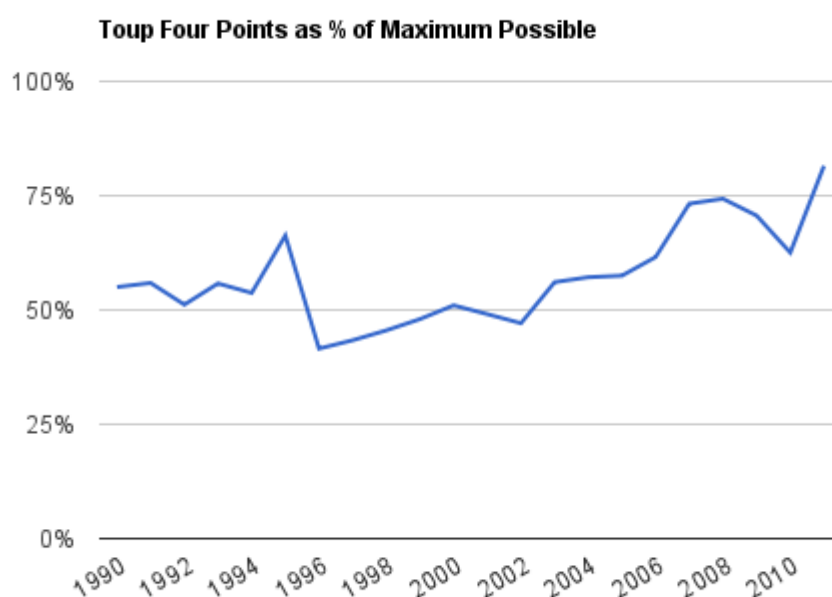
But I have yet to broach a topic, and already I digress. My point is points, and the consideration that Djokovic didn't quite take them all. As an interesting corollary, every event Djokovic entered but failed to win was subsequently won by Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer or Andy Murray. Furthermore, of the ten titles Djokovic did win, in only two cases did he defeat someone other than those three in the final (Belgrade and Montreal), the point being that had he somehow lost those matches, the titles would have remained in the club. All of this is a complicated way of saying that the Big Four have once again dominated the season.

They've been doing so for years, of course, and the prevailing belief that they wouldn't do it again seemed to be based on little more than the assumption that doing so defied reason, which is a species of wishful thinking. As it happened, their domination was more profound than ever. Between the four of them, they claimed every significant title available: four Majors, nine Masters 1000s, the World Tour Finals (and the Davis Cup). On top of that, they all won a 500 level event, and only Nadal failed to win a 250 level one. I am confident in saying nothing like that has happened before.

Furthermore, not only did they win these events, they often filled out the four semifinal berths as well. It has already been pointed out that 2011 was the first year since 1964 that no player reached their first Grand Slam final, and the first time in the Open era that no player reached their first Grand Slam *semifinal*. That's quite staggering. There were also no new titlists at the Masters events, and no new finalists. The upshot is that an unholy proportion of available ranking points are

commanded by the combined top four (with Djokovic hogging the lion's share of those).

Since pictures render everything more excitingly comprehensible, here's a graph to illustrate. It shows the top four's year end points as a percentage of all available points at the mandatory events (Majors, Masters and the WTF), going back to 1990. The maximum possible points is defined by all four players reaching the semifinals or better at every event.



The spike in 1995 was due to strong seasons by Sampras, Agassi, Becker and Muster, while the subsequent plummet reflected how calamitously several of those players fell away. Since that low point in 1996, there has been a steady trend towards top-heavy domination. In 2011, the top four accrued 81.52% of the theoretical maximum. If anything it appears as though they underperformed last year, lazily gifting Masters titles to Roddick, Ljubicic and Soderling.

Is there really any reason to think things will change next year? Federer has cleared 30, but he is emphatically still Federer and the usual rules do not apply. The other three guys are either 24 or 25, allegedly prime ages for a male tennis player. We look at a year like this year, and think *surely* it can't continue. But is that just wishful thinking?

Ten Maidens

In 2010, five different players captured a maiden title, although history does not record what they did with it after that. Whatever it was, once word got round the locker-room the deed was keenly emulated. In 2011 the number doubled. We can only hope the treatment has been humane, unlike in the seventies, when a captive maiden title might be chained up in a basement for months, and confined to a subsistence diet.

In terms of patterns, I'd love to report that hours of staring at the winners list has yielded a sudden, searing insight. Sadly, there is little to say. Every winner was from a different country. Some winners were virgins in their first final, others veterans in their fifth. I would have laid down money against at least one of them ever claiming a tour trophy, whilst two others were the most notable players without silverware. About all we can usefully say is that all of the events were 250 level, and that the top four did not grace any of them, which has become the sole precondition of anyone else winning. Is it worth mentioning that nine out of these ten players have subsequently achieved their highest year-end ranking? Sure, in much the same way that taking to a group of ten bystanders with a fire hose would result in most of them getting wet.

1. Kevin Anderson - SA Tennis Open, Johannesburg

The SA Tennis Open was only a young event, but the unfortunate alchemy of scheduling and geography conspired to fatally accelerate its life-cycle. 2009 was its heyday, and this year saw a rapid decent first into dotage, and then death. It is perhaps poetic that a local won the thing before the end, and Kevin Anderson is a likable guy and a fine player, but he posted more impressive first-round exits elsewhere this year.

2. Ivan Dodig - PBZ Zagreb Indoors, Zagreb

Zagreb also takes place the week after the Australian Open, and thus also guarantees itself a second-rate and locally-weighted draw (Goran Ivanisevic played in the doubles), but it was still a typically gutsy performance from the tour's most rumpled player (there should be a trophy for that).

3. Milos Raonic - SAP Open, San Jose

This was not the beginning of the slide for Fernando Verdasco, but it was the point at which it became irreversible. The tipping point can be traced to the moment in the final when a fan yelled out on championship point. Busily essaying any excuse he could find, Verdasco missed what everyone else was seeing, which was that Milos Raonic had arrived.

4. Ryan Sweeting - US Men's Clay Court Championship, Houston

The general feeling was that this was Kei Nishikori's final to lose. For pundits this was just an abstruse and clichéd idea, but for Nishikori it was a cherished goal, which he duly achieved. Sweeting was left holding the trophy, after playing the most ill-tempered first final I have ever witnessed.

5. Pablo Andujar - Grand Prix Hassan II, Casablanca

There is no category in men's tennis at the moment that does not include a Spaniard in it, almost as though it is a structural requirement of the sport. (Swarthiest? Check. Dreamiest thighs? You bet. Most macho website? Never in doubt.) Anyhow, back in Casablanca, Pablo Andujar became his nation's representative on the first-time titlist list, dispatching Potito Starace in a nervously-fought, low-grade final.

6. Andreas Seppi - AEGON International, Eastbourne

Unlike his finalist opponent Janko Tipsarevic, Andreas Seppi falls into the category of a seasoned tour stalwart for whom a maiden title was by no means a given. If the Italian was to break through, Eastbourne, played on grass, was perhaps the least likely venue at which to do it. This was the notorious final in which Tipsarevic retired in the final game, as Seppi served for the title, an example of sour sportsmanship will rightly dog the Serbian for years to come.

7. Alexandr Dolgoplov - ATP Studena Croatia Open, Umag

The high quality final ultimately devolved into a flurry of tense errors, dead net-cords and a busted string, but it was the mercurial Dolgoplov hoisting the unbelievably tasteful and understated trophy at the end.

8. Robin Haase - bet-at-home Cup, Kitzbühel

In his first tour final, Robin Haase became the first Dutchman since Martin Verkerk to

claim a tour title, a gap of seven years. Until this point we only had the odd brilliant set to make us wonder why Haase can't play well all the time. Now we have a whole week.

9. Florian Mayer - BRD Nastase Tiriac Trophy, Bucharest

I had waited for years for Florian Mayer to start winning titles, having predicted shortly after his appearance on the scene in about 2002 that he was the next big thing, although I was not so blinkered that I believed he would dominate unopposed. Of course he would be sharing the limelight with Xavier Malisse, whose Wimbledon semifinal was clearly a portent of great things to come, and there was residual buzz about that young firebrand Federer. Nine years later, and my prediction has been borne out, if only in Bucharest. I'm willing to admit I was wrong about Malisse.

10. Janko Tipsarevic - Malaysian Open, Kuala Lumpur

It was becoming ludicrous. Janko Tipsarevic was in the midst of a career year, he'd risen over 30 places into the top 20, and he was still without a title to his name. I think I'm right in saying it was the most talked about thing in Serbian tennis this year, although I am admittedly not abreast of Jelena Jankovic's antics. The monkey was finally removed from Tipsarevic's back in Malaysia, and, unbearably lightened, he soared to the Moscow title several weeks later, and eventually floated into the top ten.

New Balls (Please)

In the eternal quest for recognition, there is no quality more valuable than to be easily and readily identifiable. This is not a difficult concept, although its ramifications are many, and it is amazing how long it took to catch on. The moment it did was the moment brands achieved their own life, and the moment genre attained primacy over content. It turns out there is no limit to the disparate things that might be grouped, with an allegedly unifying theme imposed only later.

About ten years ago the ATP belatedly caught up to this elementary idea, and the men's tour was subjected to a thorough brand repositioning, which is a cute way of saying everything became shinier and simpler. The Super 9 events became the

Masters Series, while the useful but apparently baffling Entry System gave way to the facile and mostly useless Champion's Race. The centrepiece of this effort was the New Balls Please campaign, which threw together a number of up and coming tennis players, many of who shared few traits beyond a willingness to glower for the promotional material.

Concerned at a perceived waning in fan interest, due largely to Sampras' decade-long dominance, the ATP launched the New Balls campaign just prior to the US Open in 2000, and immediately struck gold when Safin thrashed Sampras in the final. A poster ad followed up: 'How do you like me now?' demanded Safin sternly. A counter-poster appeared, featuring Sampras and Agassi: "Dream on, boys," it proclaimed, boldly implying that Pete and Andre had arranged it themselves, and that this was a bona fide turf war. Kuerten dreamily topped both at the Masters Cup to grab the year-end top ranking, and the New Balls line-up was expanded to an even dozen, and a calendar appeared (which I still have in a cupboard somewhere). The dour, chin-thrusting squints of the participants were familiar: Haas, Hewitt, Ferrero, Federer, Grosjean etc. An aptitude for tennis was about all they had in common, and many were already on wildly divergent career paths. But they were marketable, and the fallacious idea of wholesale generational change in tennis became entrenched.

Skip forwards a decade, and for the first time in years, we are beset with an identifiable gang of youths on the rise. Each made his mark at the 2011 Australian Open. By the end of that tournament, they were being treated as a cohesive unit, inevitably, and paid the lazy compliment of being assigned roles based on players of the past. Thus one was the new Sampras, another one the next Mecir, or Rios. Their names were Grigor Dimitrov, Milos Raonic, Ricardas Berankis and Bernard Tomic. March saw the addition of Ryan Harrison. 2011 was their first full year on the tour. The most amazing thing is that the New Balls Please campaign was not rehashed; an opportunity missed by the ATP, mercifully.

Milos Raonic

Current Ranking: 31

I first encountered Raonic as he pounded through the Australian Open qualifying draw with placid violence, and first wrote about him as he tore into the main one. At

the time it seemed clear – and I suggested as much - that if any player is fated to succeed, it was he. Quite aside from his lethally exuberant first strike game, he boasted the more ephemeral advantages of a baked-in fan base (being Canadian) and a ready-made catch-phrase ('Another game for Milos!').

He just needed the results. They began as a trickle in Melbourne, which grew to a torrent in North America soon afterwards. Raonic captured his first title at San Jose in February and very nearly grabbed a second the following week in Memphis. His clay season was reassuringly solid – it turns out he can even play *real* tennis - and big things were expected at Wimbledon, where his penchant for short shorts nearly launched a New Balls Please campaign on its own. Sadly, he fell injured early, and spent the entire US Summer rehabilitating. It is no stretch to see him rising higher still in 2012, although he has plenty to defend in the first four months.

Bernard Tomic

Current Ranking: 42

Tomic was the story of Wimbledon's first week, as he carved and prodded his way through an obliging coterie of also-rans (Andreev), has-beens (Davydenko), head-cases (Malisse) and Robin Soderling, becoming the youngest quarterfinalist in 26 years. It was impressive, but doubts lingered over his mettle, though not about his luck. In the quarterfinals he ran afoul of Novak Djokovic, and performed with such poise and grit in going down in four sets that reasonable doubt was quashed. He is still not well-loved, and probably never will be, but Tomic is unarguably the real deal.

The trick for him will be to add substantially to his current ranking before Wimbledon comes around again. Banking on repeating last year's run is a pretty shaky proposition. Like Raonic, he may well finish 2012 higher than he is now, but I suspect he will sink lower in the meantime.

Grigor Dimitrov

Current Ranking: 76

Most players in this group bear a pronounced burden of national expectation, since many are from proud tennis nations that aren't Spain, Serbia or France, and have thus known better days. Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov carries international expectations. Even among his peers he is considered the talented one, and he arguably didn't help

himself by basing his game so closely on Roger Federer's that he can look like a caricature. The backhand and serve appear particularly aped, although the forehand barely resembles its model, since Dimitrov, like everyone else, cannot reproduce Federer's prodigious extension through the strike-zone. There is consequently an easy trap to fall into with Dimitrov, which is merely to ridicule him, and dwell on the tangible gaps between him and his idol. Such an approach yields easy irony, but glosses over the fact that regardless of his model, he is a tremendously stylish and exciting player in his own right, and that he made fine progress in 2011.

The issue, which I've touched on before, is that it's hard to see where any sudden improvement will come from. What can be 'fixed' in order for him to join the elite? Perhaps tinkering around the edges – the backhand needs to become steadier – will be enough, and greater mental fortitude and stamina will do the rest. He will undoubtedly rise further next year, but the real question is whether he will ever become the next Federer, or whether he's already the next Gasquet (a position that will remain occupied for the foreseeable future).

Ryan Harrison

Current Ranking: 79

Ryan Harrison's win over Raonic at Indian Wells was among the more memorable matches that no one will remember, and he fought hard in going down to Federer the round after. His loss to Marin Cilic at the US Open was memorable and forgettable, too, albeit for different reasons. Both matches illustrated how far this group has come. Indian Wells was considered an upset, Harrison's 'arrival' as it were. By September, Harrison hadn't achieved anything astounding – a few semifinals in the smaller lead-ups - and yet he was expected to defeat Marin Cilic easily. He didn't go down easily, it's true, but he did go down noisily.

He has the game to rise much higher, and his inflated sense of entitlement probably won't hurt in the short term. But it was apparent that he believed too readily in his destiny against Cilic that day, which is a ludicrous proposition from any angle. You can feel entitled, but a sense of proportion helps, too. Cilic worked hard and took the win. Harrison tossed his racquet around and shouted a bit, and didn't.

Ricardas Berankis**Current Ranking: 125**

Alone among this group, Ricardas Berankis receded this year, after last year finishing as the youngest player in the top 100. This was mostly due to injury, and he only played 18 matches. It was a shame, since he began the year strongly. Nonetheless, I harbour a suspicion that even fully fit he will struggle on the main tour. Time will tell. Paul Annacone's wonderfully insightful Twitter updates have revealed that Berankis is working with Federer in the offseason. That can't hurt.